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Misguided Rage



ANDY McNAMARA
EDITOR-IN-CHIEF
andy@gameinformer.com

Read my column or
comment on this letter at
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For a long time I was angry about in-game items. I consider myself an old-school gamer, and the idea that something could be sold within a game world really irked me. Isn't the very idea of games that you need to earn your victories? How can there be victory if you can literally pay your way to the top? (Insert your favorite joke about the Yankees or Real Madrid here).

The reality is, I want games to be the biggest entertainment medium in the world, and I still feel we are on our way to that lofty goal. Who knew? People love to play games. However, as the number of gamers grows, the diversity and levels of interest change.

So who am I to judge what one person calls fair? You want to play a game that lets you pay to win? Have at it.

Do I need pay to play? That depends; some games are worse offenders than others. Ultimately, I put faith in the market that gamers will punish the companies that create unfair economies. That said, more often than not, pay-to-win games aren't really for me. But that's the thing: Not every game is made for me, you, or any one individual.

These days, games are made for all types of people. Anger over in-game stores that sell skins or boosts for single-player games is misguided rage. Don't buy them if you don't like them. They aren't for you. But I can tell you in games that I love, I don't mind investing more money to be different or to get access to different weapons or items if I feel they have worth to me. The key there is "worth to me." It's an individual's choice.

There are rarely times in games when I would want an in-game boost to make single-player content easier, but I can see how people with busy lives or perhaps just lesser skills might find a benefit in having the option to invest in their entertainment, in a sense, to play the game the way they want to play.

I expect more games to have in-game stores as we move forward, as there are just too many people who want it. So it's time to move on from raging about the fact that these items or boosts exist and instead focus on praising the games that do it right and punishing the games that don't by not giving them your hard-earned dollars. That's the most powerful vote we get as gamers.

Enjoy the issue.

Cheers,

0415
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Mad Max

Max made an impact at E3 when he showed up in a tire-squealing reveal trailer – before essentially vanishing. Now, he's returning to the Wasteland. Avalanche is creating a new version of the iconic antihero, while remaining true to his tormented core. Read our cover story for a look at the newly imagined world, extensive hands-on impressions, and what scrapping last-gen versions means for the game. **by Jeff Cork**



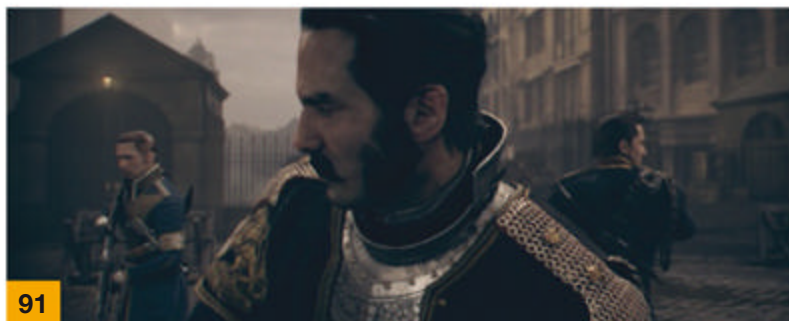
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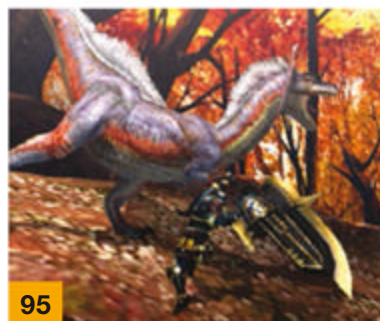
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» 4 Feedback

Readers were surprisingly kind to us about our top 50 of 2014 list. They also tell us to predict the future of The Elder Scrolls Online, complain about pull-quotes, and ask that everyone please stop focusing on graphics so much.

» 10 Connect

DICE wrapped up recently and we have the best quotes from the annual event. We also break down the origins of all your favorite platformer games and mechanics, speak with Zelda producer Eiji Aonuma about his career, and look at the state of the MMORPG.

» 60 Previews

We check in on Mortal Kombat X and examine a number of anticipated PC games, including Adr1ft, Star Citizen, Darkest Dungeon, Stranded Deep, Sid Meier's Starships, and many others. We also take a deep look at MLB 15 and the anime mash-up fighter, J-Stars Victory VS+.

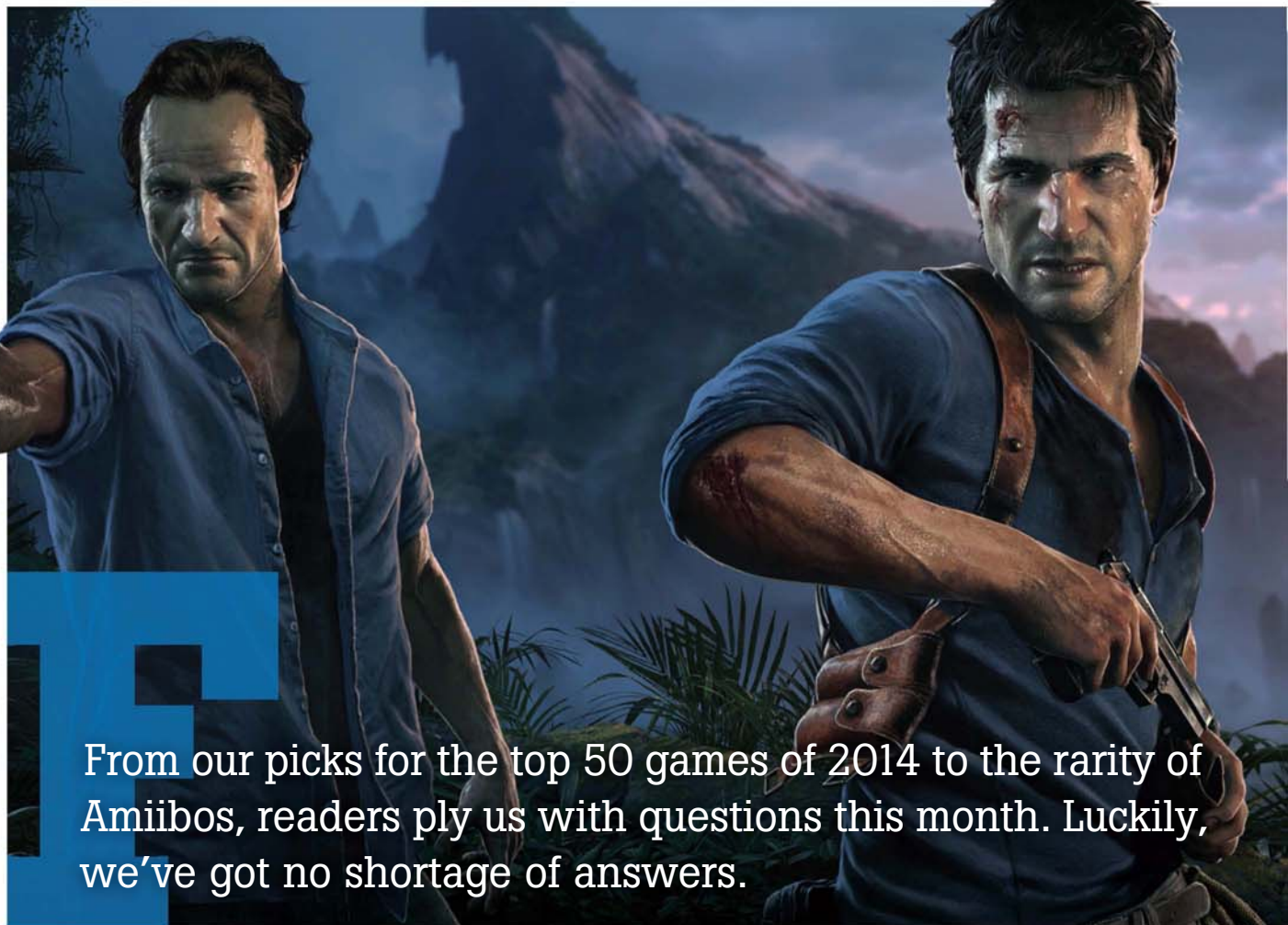
» 84 Reviews

This month we have reviews for Evolve and The Order: 1886 – two games that appeared on our cover. We also offer opinions on Dying Light, Kirby's latest on Wii U, and Monster Hunter 4 Ultimate on 3DS.

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CORRECTION: In issue 263, we incorrectly listed Square Enix as the publisher for Rise of the Tomb Raider. In actuality, Microsoft is publishing the title. We apologize for the error.



From our picks for the top 50 games of 2014 to the rarity of Amiibos, readers ply us with questions this month. Luckily, we've got no shortage of answers.

Infesting The Top 50?

I'm a longtime reader, and there are times when I don't agree with what y'all have to say, but I accept that people have differing opinions. That said, I was very disappointed to see you place the glitch-filled mess that was Assassin's Creed Unity on your Top 50 Games of 2014 list (issue 262). I understand that developers have a tough time meeting deadlines, but releasing a broken game is unacceptable and shouldn't be rewarded. Rather, it should held up as a lesson to Ubisoft and other developers that sometimes it's better to miss the holiday season and release a quality product than to release it anyway and take a blow to your credibility.

Tucker Mitchell
via email

I had a wonderful time reading your Top 50 list, but I have a question about Dragon Age: Inquisition winning Game of the Year. I agree that Inquisition is a fantastic game that brings the series back to its original glory – at least after it was patched. At launch, the game was far too bugged to be considered a masterpiece. Critics and gamers alike universally panned the game's glitches. How does a game that doesn't even function properly win GOTY awards left and right? It sets a terrifying precedent for publishers to continue not caring about finishing their games and just doing the bug-fixing after launch.

Andrew Thiede
via email

Surprisingly few readers complained about our Top 50 list this year, but the ones who did raised an interesting question: Should games that suffer from rocky launches be excluded from the list? We chose to look past the bugs and focus on the underlying quality of the games in question (which we still argued about extensively), but we too are worried by how many games released unfinished this year.

Unsubscribed

I would like to hear your speculation on the news that The Elder Scrolls Online is dropping its subscription fee. I feel that dropping the fee means that Bethesda no longer needs the money to fund future development because they are expecting a large amount of money to come in soon from pre-orders.

This logically leads me to believe that Bethesda will be announcing Fallout 4 this summer, and that its release date will be close enough to be confirmed and to start taking pre-orders.

Dylan Londrigan
via email

As much as we'd love your hypothesis to be true, Dylan, there's a more likely scenario: Gamers – and especially console owners – don't want to pay a monthly fee to play a game they already purchased, and Bethesda thinks it can sell more copies (and future expansions) by doing away with the subscription. In any event, it's good news for gamers, even if it doesn't foretell the announcement of a long-awaited sequel.



Contact Us

feedback@gameinformer.com

Good To Be Bad?

I was just wondering why, in issue 262's The Good, The Bad, and The Ugly, you said it was "Bad" that Ubisoft decided to make up for Assassin's Creed Unity's buggy launch by giving consumers free DLC or a free game. At least Ubisoft is taking responsibility, diligently working to correct the mistakes, and giving us something to make up for it. This shows me they care about their customers. I downloaded the Dead Kings DLC the other day and it's a sizable addition to an already huge game. And giving season pass holders Far Cry 4, The Crew, or other good games for free – what's wrong with that?

Dave Belanger
via email

We applaud Ubisoft's commitment to make things right by its customers, which is most certainly a good thing. However, the fact that the publisher felt compelled to offer up its other games as a mea culpa shows just how bad Unity's launch state was. Freebies are a nice gesture, but they're a salve to the underlying problem, not a solution.

Fooled Into Reading

I have had it with being scammed into reading things twice. I thought it was bad enough when websites started doing it in their articles; I stopped visiting those sites. Now, in some of your magazine features, you are doing it too. Why, why, why?! There is absolutely no logical reason for why you are putting quotes in a sidebar that are already in the article! We're reading it in the article – no need to repeat it on the side in big letters. Please stop this insane practice; it is so annoying to the readers.

Mike
via email

What you are describing is called a pull quote, and no, we won't stop doing it.

There is absolutely no logical reason for why you are putting quotes in a sidebar that are already in the article!"



Still Waiting...

I wrote a letter to Feedback about six months ago about how open-world games aren't really open because so many buildings are inaccessible (Behind Closed Doors, issue 257). My question now is with No Mans Sky's procedural generation software: Could this be used to open up more of the city in a GTA-type game?

Kirk Austin
Huntsville, AL

Hello Games' impressive engine has been developed from the ground up to create No Man's Sky's alien landscapes, so we doubt it would be much help creating interiors for buildings in an open-world city – to say nothing of the fact that the tech belongs solely to the developer. Rest assured, Kirk, it's still a totally awesome idea that we'd like to see happen as well, but we're not quite there.

Claims Adjuster

I am a longtime GI reader and think you guys provide the most non-biased game reviews and stories out there. I feel this era of gaming is being overwhelmed by games claiming to be something they are not, and they are being called great simply for their graphics. Destiny was a game that I sank well over 200 hours into, and then I realized that whatever I did, I couldn't advance any further in the game. I also recently read about The Witcher 3,

which claims to be a better version of Skyrim. However, there reportedly isn't even a character creator in the game. Graphics are not everything; Assassin's Creed and Call of Duty prove that every year with the same great-looking, repetitious gameplay. Someone needs to speak up for us gamers; I'm tired of being lied to.

Rich Warabak
via email

Destiny is one of those rare, wonderful cases where gamers will castigate it for not living up to the hype while simultaneously admitting without a hint of irony that they've played it for hundreds of hours. Regardless, games can't "claim" to be anything by themselves. If you feel you're being lied to, you should consider the source of the information and adjust your expectations accordingly.

Short Answers To Readers' Burning Questions:

"Why the hell is Flappy Bird the Best Mobile Exclusive on your Top 50 Games of 2014?"

That was the Readers' Pick, so don't blame us.

"Thanks to Resident Evil HD, can we expect an HD re-release of Resident Evil 2 as well?"

We sure hope so.

"Why do you never talk about the new Sega console?"

We prefer to live in the real world.

Reader Gibberish:

"Notice there are options. We can have a issue full of commercials who could become movies. and then games."

Question Of The Month:

What's your dream video game? Send us your pitch – we're not going to make it or anything, but we might tell you if it's cool...



(Left) Tim caught up with a bunch of Game Informer community members at Washington DC's recent Music and Gaming Festival (a.k.a. MAGFest). You guys are the greatest

(Right) The team at Avalanche looks entirely too happy to be working on Mad Max. Come on guys, get angry!

GI SPY
continued on page 6

PHOTOS FROM THE VIDEO GAME INDUSTRY

On Your Mind



■ **36%** Most Anticipated Game Responses

■ **20%** Top 50 Cheers/Jeers

■ **18%** Launch Day Woes

■ **14%** Review Score Feedback

■ **12%** Platform Exclusivity Gripes



Great Expectations

In issue 262, we asked readers what their most anticipated game of 2015 is so far. The results were split evenly across a wide swath of games, which we'll take as a sign of a healthy industry. Here are some responses.

I am so excited for The Division! Ubisoft didn't have the best 2014, but I feel The Division will put them back on top based on what we've seen of the game so far. Teaming up with your friends to travel this gorgeous post-apocalyptic New York City seems like the perfect recipe for fun.

Matthew Alexander

I'm positively ecstatic for the new Star Wars: Battlefront. I put hours upon hours into Battlefront II thanks to its epic campaign, huge multiplayer battles, and ridiculously fun Heroes and Villains mode. I have no doubt DICE is the greatest hope the dormant franchise has to rebound with roaring success.

Joey Thurmond

Metal Gear Witcher of Uncharted Arkham. In all seriousness, if these games (and many others) don't get delayed, it will be hard to pick a favorite for this year. I guess today I'm anticipating Arkham Knight the most, but tomorrow it could be Uncharted 4 or The Witcher 3, and another day it might be No Man's Sky! It's a good dilemma to have, and I'm sure others feel the same way.

Sammy Caloras

Long Live The King

I was excited to read your article on the King's Quest reboot (Passing The Hat, issue 262). Growing up on PC gaming (yes, I'm a 53-year-old gamer), Sierra games were some of the best to play. After reading your article, I can't wait for the new King's Quest game. My only fear is that it will turn out like other remakes such as Leisure Suit Larry (another Sierra series), which was such a disappointment. If The Odd Gentlemen continue working with the Williamses, they just may have a game-of-the-year contender on their hands.

John Ziegler
via email

Few series are as beloved as King's Quest, and from what we've seen, the newest installment is in good hands. Now if only Larry could get the reboot he deserves. Well, technically we guess he did get the reboot a lounge lizard deserves, but you know what we mean...

Supply & Demand

I have had my Wii U for about a year now, and I am perfectly content with the console. The library of games is expanding, and with upcoming games like the new Zelda and Star Fox, I am excited for what's next. However, with the new GameCube adapter and controllers, the Amiibo craze, and the New 3DS XL charger selling separately, I have to question what Nintendo is thinking. No one can get their hands on an adapter, unless they are willing to pay upwards of \$60 online, and Amiibos are running out of stock as soon as they are released, leaving only figures like Peach and Luigi that nobody wants. Do you think Nintendo will fix its supply problem?

Tristan Bradfield
via email

Nintendo has been running into a number of shortages lately, some of which are more conspicuous than others. As long as fans keep on shelling out money for the coveted figurines, can you really blame Nintendo? For more on the company's strategy, read this month's Opinion on page 40.



(Left) Two of Game Informer's own animated goofballs pose next to some of Pixar's, along with camera and staging artist Leo Santos

(Right) Kim poses with Ubisoft's Anne Lewis, Raha Bouda, Mayya Grinberg, and Kimmie Kaspar



GI SPY

continued on page 8

CURRENT LEVEL

12/45



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120/300



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1



WINNER

1 Pedro Fresse

This beautiful piece tells the story of the game better than the official box art

2 Larry Valencia

A perfect artistic summation of Majora's Mask

3 Ashley Huisman

After getting caught by a Poison Ivy trap for the 100th time, you'd think Batman would stay away from plants

4 Aaron Johnson

Aaron's composition consists of 100 different video game characters. How many can you name?



2



3



4

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(Left) Ben and Double Fine's Matt Hansen are big fans of Grim Fandango. Matt's just a little more shy about his affection

(Right) Dan "Shoe" Hsu and Christina Ha help show off the stylish kicks of Bungie PR guru Genevieve Waldman





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A New Online Frontier

SONY ONLINE ENTERTAINMENT BECOMES DAYBREAK GAME COMPANY

From EverQuest to PlanetSide, Sony Computer Entertainment in its various forms has created and curated massive worlds of content and imagination for more than a decade. Now it is looking out on arguably its most daunting horizon – the company is leaving the umbrella of Sony with a new name and owner. New York investment firm Columbus Nova has bought SOE – now named Daybreak Game Company – for an undisclosed amount. Daybreak says it will continue on in the same manner with the same games, but the path before it is undeniably different from here on out.

by Matthew Kato

Daybreak has already stated that it wants to bring its existing properties to new platforms as well as create new ones for them. In a statement the company mentioned supporting the Xbox, mobile, and other platforms in addition to Sony's systems. In a tweet shortly after the deal was announced, Daybreak president John Smedley specifically said, "I can't wait to make Xbox One games."

Both Daybreak and Columbus Nova declined to elaborate on the deal, but its public statement gave a glimpse of what existing customers can expect. "It will be business as usual and all SOE games will continue on their current path of development and operation," it read. "In fact, we expect to have even more resources available to us as a result of this acquisition. It also means new exciting developments for our existing IP and games as we can now fully embrace the multi-platform world we are living in."

This is Columbus Nova's first pure gaming acquisition, although it has some experience in the field. Senior partner Jason Epstein brokered Harmonix's deal to buy back the Rock Band-maker's independence from Viacom in 2010. With Columbus Nova largely an unknown quantity in the industry, the question is how much appetite does it have for the inherent risk of shouldering big-budget, network-intensive free-to-play titles while simultaneously trying to strike out onto even riskier platforms for MMOs – console and mobile?

"They must see it as a growth space," says DFC Intelligence analyst David Cole. "SOE is different because the type of products they build are very risky, capital-intensive investments. That risk/reward proposition has scared off lots of investors. Ten years ago, when World of Warcraft came out, a lot of investors were jumping into the space, and they got burned. It makes it interesting that an investor would be willing to acquire SOE."

Joost van Dreunen, CEO of market-research firm SuperData, specializes in areas such as free-to-play gaming. Having worked with Columbus Nova in the past, he thinks that Daybreak has a few factors on its side: the products, the development talent, and the fanbase. "[SOE] has a very loyal fanbase. What you're buying, essentially, is not just only the talented group

of developers, but you're buying an audience. That's key. There's so much content out there, there's so much supply. Having a title like an EverQuest – a generation of gamers excited about the next version of it – you don't get a chance to buy that very often. So I think that in terms of overall risk that a finance company can take, this is on the low end."

Despite its pronouncement to expand to new platforms, both van Dreunen and Cole think we won't see that for a little while. "...Right out of the gate in the next 12 months, there might be some announcements, but I doubt they are going to be releasing PlanetSide 2 on mobile," van Dreunen says.

"They're probably going to have to narrow-down their focus a little bit more instead of expanding it per se," Cole says. "It's tough to go in a lot of different directions at once. I think you'll have these layoffs then they'll probably announce a very specific direction of where they want to go."

The layoffs have already occurred at the developer's Austin and San Diego offices as part of the realignment. Furthermore, senior leadership such as EverQuest director of development David Georgeson, and PlanetSide 2 creative director Matthew Higby have left in the wake of the deal.

Currently, Daybreak has zombie survival title H1Z1 (shown above), EverQuest Next, Landmark, and the PS4 version of PlanetSide 2 in development. The company has stressed that all shall be unaffected. The games are all free-to-play (although they charge for early access), with monetization through post-release functionality options and discounts, as well as an optional subscription service through Daybreak's Station.com online portal.

Since Sony Computer Entertainment got direct control of SOE in 2008, the company expanded with satellite offices in Denver, Austin, and elsewhere, and contracted out work as well. In 2011 massive layoffs hit the SOE structure, including the closing of offices and the canceling of The Agency. That same year Star Wars Galaxies shut down, and SOE suffered a massive security breach whereby information from 24.6 million accounts was stolen. In 2014, SOE shut down

Free Realms, Star Wars: Clone Wars Adventures, Vanguard: Saga of Heroes, and Wizardry Online.

Sony as a larger entity has recently had its own share of troubles; projecting a loss for the fiscal year ending on March 31, 2015 of 170 billion yen (\$1.45 billion), and through the sale of SOE Sony is writing off 6.2 billion yen (\$52.8 million).

"[SOE] was always kind of an odd duck making these PC games," Cole says. "The audience of the games they were making wasn't that console audience. It's a surprise they kept it for that long, really."

Beyond the context of Sony's financial troubles, the MMO genre as a whole looks healthy. Van Dreunen and SuperData say that revenue for all free-to-play MMOs in the U.S. last year was just under \$1.4 billion, with over 51 million monthly active users. SuperData estimates that in 2015 these numbers will hold and the genre will be stable, perhaps with a slight dip in the monthly active users. On consoles alone, van Dreunen told Fortune.com he believes MMOs will bring in \$96 million this year – despite the fact that both the Xbox One and PlayStation 4 require memberships to their respective online services.

Currently, some of Daybreak's titles are doing well. The company says DC Universe Online for PC, PlayStation 4, and PS3 has over 18 million registered users as of November of last year, with PS4 players accounting for 40 percent of new registered users and console players in general logging 76 percent of the hours played.

Overall, van Dreunen thinks Daybreak is well positioned in the market and could thrive on its own. "By having more freedom, both creatively and financially perhaps, I think that they will probably pursue free-to-play more aggressively," he says. "I think that's a good thing." He thinks current titles such as H1Z1 and PlanetSide 2 are well positioned to do this, and that the company's monetization of user-generated content – paying users a royalty for the content they generate and sell in Landmark/EverQuest Next – is the "next version of monetization."

Changing from Sony Online Entertainment into Daybreak presents its share of challenges, but the developer is accustomed to creating new horizons for its audiences to explore. ♦

ZELDA'S KEEPER

Zelda producer Eiji Aonuma on himself,
Miyamoto, and Majora's Mask



Shigeru Miyamoto may have created the Zelda series, but for the past 15 years the franchise has been in the capable hands of Eiji Aonuma. He was instrumental in the development of Ocarina of Time, directed Majora's Mask, and today serves as producer for the entire Zelda franchise. Much like his boss Miyamoto, however, Aonuma and his development practices are somewhat mysterious. We recently asked him about his path to video games, the design decisions that went into the original and the new Majora's Mask, and some burning questions about the Zelda universe. *interview by Kyle Hilliard*



What was your path into video game design?

I started in university studying design, and when I graduated started looking for work. For me, the question of design is: How do you convey a concept to a lot of different people? I was wondering how to apply that to the world of work. What sort of jobs would allow me to do that fundamental task? I hit upon the idea of games. At that time, the Famicom – as it was called in Japan – was very popular, and I started thinking about what sort of design tasks would be necessary to convey some of the concepts of games to people.

After joining Nintendo, I originally worked as an artist, doing the design of characters like Mario in pixel art. I went on to character design for lots of different games. I eventually reached the point where I wanted to make my own game. This was around the time that A Link to the Past had come out. Playing that game really made me realize there were lots of different sorts of feelings you could convey in a game; it opened up some new horizons.

How did you come to be in charge of Zelda?

I directed a few different titles [like the Japan-only *Marvelous: Mōhitotsu no Takarajima*—Ed.] before I worked on my first Zelda game, but what's interesting is that a lot of those games had a very Zelda-like feel to them. Perhaps it was because I had been so influenced by my recent playthrough of A Link to the Past, but it was something Mr. Miyamoto noticed in the work I had been doing. He said, "You know – if you want to make a Zelda game maybe you should just come over to that team and make a Zelda game." That is when I joined the Zelda team that produced Ocarina of Time.

What is your relationship with Mr. Miyamoto?

First and foremost he is my boss, so I do have to do what he says. If he says that we are going to make a game a certain way, then of course that is something I'll do. But my role has grown as well. Being a producer now, sometimes I talk to him as another producer. I will report to him about the progress on games and get his advice about what we should do next and how would be the best way to convey something to players. And that's how I work with him on a daily basis.

Even 15 years later, the three-day cycle in Majora's Mask continues to be controversial among Zelda fans. Was there internal opposition to the mechanic when the game was being developed?

It certainly was a big move to go to this three-day cycle as opposed to a more traditional Zelda, but we felt it was going to be different and very stimulating for people who had played Ocarina. However, we were also concerned about possibly confusing players who were new to the Zelda series. That was always on my mind. We knew we were facing a very short development cycle for this game – it was really only one year from start to end. We wanted to make sure that we were bringing out a new vision – something that was very different, rather than working on a short development cycle to just rehash older gameplay concepts. That was something very important to me and why I felt we needed to make a big move.

How did you approach making changes to the 3DS version of Majora's Mask?

Looking at the original version now, you can really see the places where the player would have slowed down. When they approach a new area, if they can't quite figure [it] out, they're going to wander around outside and have a lot of downtime rather than getting to the content that you want them to play.

The same thing happens anytime the difficulty of the game peaks. That's something we decided to pay very close attention to. For example, even in boss fights, if you don't make the weak point of the boss clear enough, people are going to go through the boss fight several times. They might just stop and look up how to beat that boss. Any time that happens, you're losing tempo in the game.

Some fans speculate that Majora's Mask is a metaphor for the stages of grief. The townsfolk are in denial of the moon falling; the Deku King is punishing the monkey out of anger; the ghost in the snow temple is bargaining for a return to the world of the living; Lulu in the Zora Temple is battling with depression; and the final temple could be considered acceptance as it wraps up Link's journey. Was this considered during development, or is this just a fan interpretation?

It's certainly true that each one of these different episodes you talked about has a slightly different emotional cast to it. One feels like it's tinged with sadness, and another with anger – that certainly was intentional. But, I also want to point out that it's not that each one of these episodes has only the one emotion that they are conveying. There are certainly other notes that we're trying to hit as well, and the reason we did this is always to allow the player to experience that emotion – to give them a chance to hook into the emotional tone of this scene and react to it and feel like they want to accomplish something in the game as a result of it. ♦

THE LEGEND OF ZELDA: BURNING QUESTIONS

We volley Zelda questions we have always wanted answered toward Eiji Aonuma.

Does the Lon Lon Ranch milk of Ocarina of Time taste different from Romani Ranch milk of Majora's Mask?

I wonder if they would be different. Well, since these two worlds are different, I would have to expect that the flavor of the milk in each world would also be a little bit different.

What would happen if you ate a Deku nut?

This is a sort of thing that is capable of emitting a really big flash when it hits the ground. So this is probably not something anyone should try to eat. I wouldn't recommend it.

Why does it hurt so much for Link to wear the transformation masks?

We're talking about masks that were created to contain the memories of people who have died. Often there are things they really wanted to do before they left this world, so becoming them is actually really painful because it's like hosting a really powerful spirit that's coming into you.

Whose soul is inside the Fierce Deity mask?

The best I can give you is just a suggestion. The best way to think of it is that the memories of all the people of Termina are inside of the Fierce Deity mask.

Where are the Romani Ranch aliens from? What planet are they from?

As I recall this was a time when UFO abduction of people, and even cattle mutilation, was something that was appearing in storylines on television at the time. We thought it would be a really interesting way to add some scariness to that particular scene. They do have a really scary face, and there is the scary face on the moon in this game – perhaps the easiest explanation is they are from the moon.



PLATFORMER ESSENTIALS

by Kyle Hilliard

**The art of jumping
is as old as console
gaming. We look
back at the standard
bearers for the genre**

Video games and jumping have fostered a close relationship for years through one of the most popular and versatile genres: the platformer. In the '80s and '90s, consoles were defined by their platforming stars. Mario sold Nintendo, Sonic sold Sega, and games like Crash Bandicoot and Spyro the Dragon sold Sony. Even as the industry has slowly gravitated towards realistic graphics, shooters, and open-world playgrounds, indie and triple-A developers alike have continued to celebrate the simple joy of jumping against a 2D plane, while dreaming up new and entertaining twists on the genre.

While the platformer isn't as dominant as it once was, the genre is here to stay and is an important video game staple. We looked into the genre's history to identify its innovators and the staple mechanics they created.

In The Beginning, There Was Kong

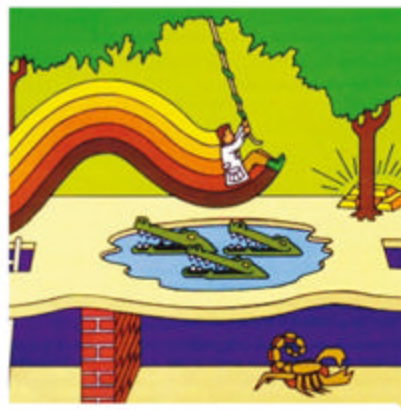
We recognize the mustachioed protagonist of Donkey Kong as Mario today, but at his inception he was known by a very appropriate alternate name: Jumpman. Donkey Kong was Nintendo legend Shigeru Miyamoto's first game, and it's no exaggeration to claim that it changed the face of video games. Not only did Donkey Kong establish the roots of the platformer genre, but it heavily influenced video games in general.

Players weren't moving white lines that

represented ping-pong paddles, or a collection of dots that could be a spaceship – they were controlling a person and dictating his acrobatics in an effort to reach and defeat a charismatic ape.

High score battles in Donkey Kong still rage on today, inspiring fierce rivalries as well as the popular documentary film, *The King of Kong: A Fistful of Quarters*.

Recommended titles: Woah Dave, N+



Swinging Into Multi-Screen

David Crane worked passionately to create Pitfall Harry on the severely limited technical capabilities of the Atari 2600. The result was one of the best early platformers. Pitfall Harry could leap through his environment, but more importantly, he was able to break beyond the confines of a single-screen and into neighboring environments. The handful of repeated screens seem paltry by today's standard, but in that early platforming era, it was a revelation.

Recommended titles: Shovel Knight, Rogue Legacy

The Birth Of An Icon

The widespread importance and long-term effects of Super Mario Bros. on the video game industry cannot be emphasized enough. The game established platformers as a destination genre and pulled video games out of a spiraling rut after the collapse of Atari. Super Mario Bros. made the Nintendo Entertainment System console a huge success, establishing nearly all of the platformer genre's important staples and even influencing the design of games outside of the genre. It's easy to forget that even broad changes like moving the focus toward the experience and away from a high score are products of Mario's influence. Today Mario stands as the most recognizable character in video games, and the Super Mario Bros. theme is one of the most recognizable songs from the medium.

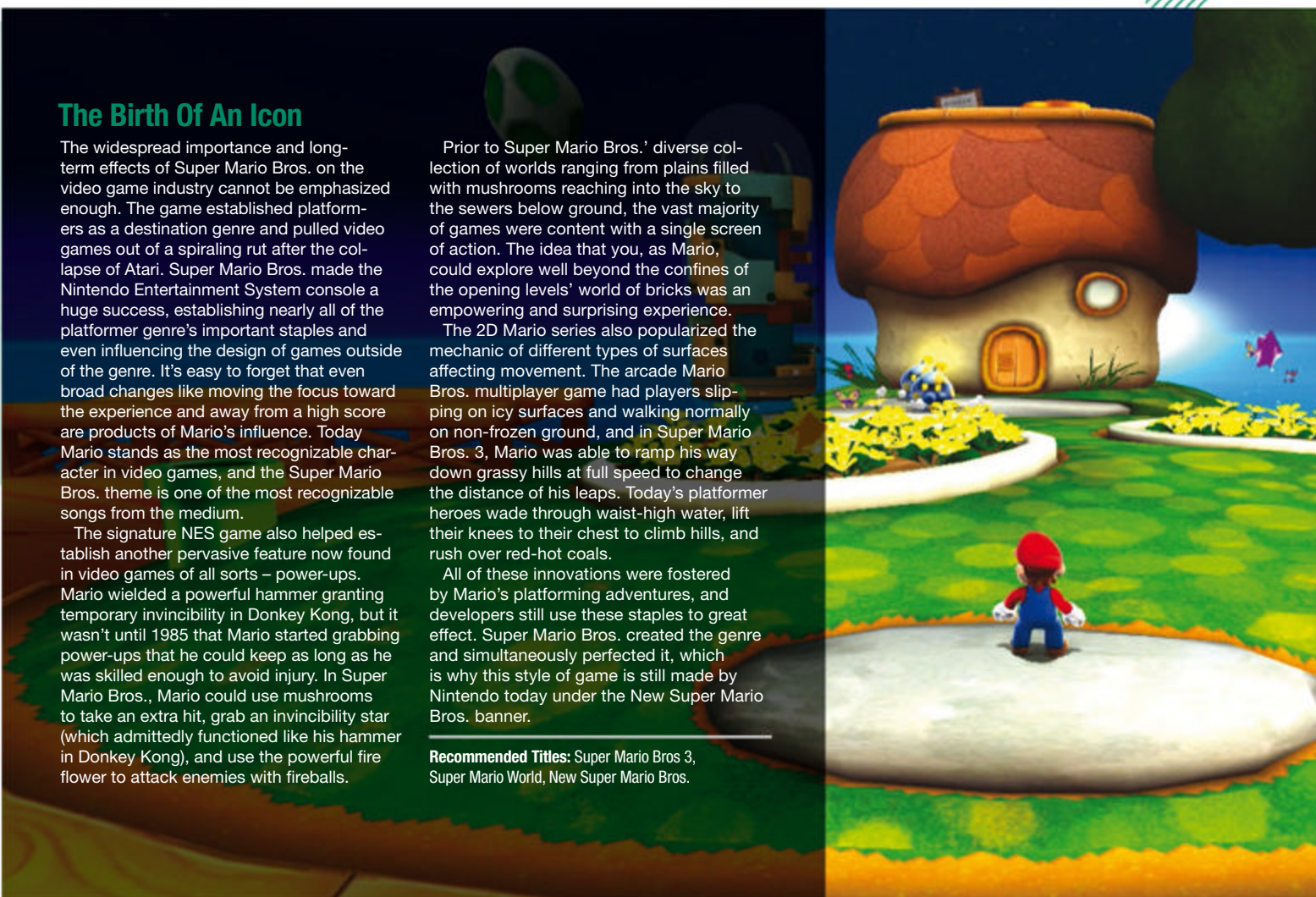
The signature NES game also helped establish another pervasive feature now found in video games of all sorts – power-ups. Mario wielded a powerful hammer granting temporary invincibility in Donkey Kong, but it wasn't until 1985 that Mario started grabbing power-ups that he could keep as long as he was skilled enough to avoid injury. In Super Mario Bros., Mario could use mushrooms to take an extra hit, grab an invincibility star (which admittedly functioned like his hammer in Donkey Kong), and use the powerful fire flower to attack enemies with fireballs.

Prior to Super Mario Bros.' diverse collection of worlds ranging from plains filled with mushrooms reaching into the sky to the sewers below ground, the vast majority of games were content with a single screen of action. The idea that you, as Mario, could explore well beyond the confines of the opening levels' world of bricks was an empowering and surprising experience.

The 2D Mario series also popularized the mechanic of different types of surfaces affecting movement. The arcade Mario Bros. multiplayer game had players slipping on icy surfaces and walking normally on non-frozen ground, and in Super Mario Bros. 3, Mario was able to ramp his way down grassy hills at full speed to change the distance of his leaps. Today's platformer heroes wade through waist-high water, lift their knees to their chest to climb hills, and rush over red-hot coals.

All of these innovations were fostered by Mario's platforming adventures, and developers still use these staples to great effect. Super Mario Bros. created the genre and simultaneously perfected it, which is why this style of game is still made by Nintendo today under the New Super Mario Bros. banner.

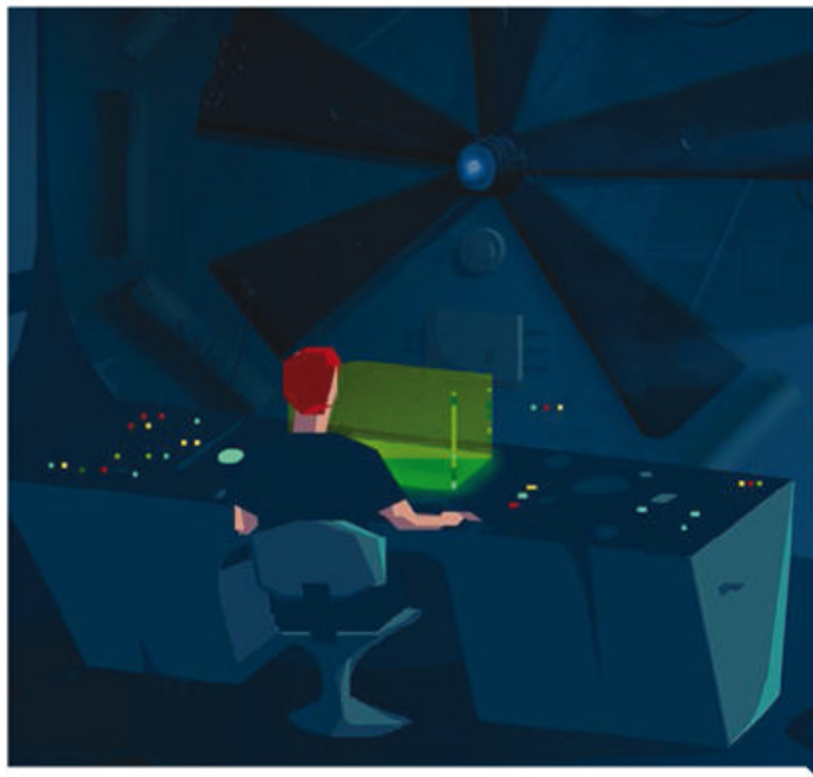
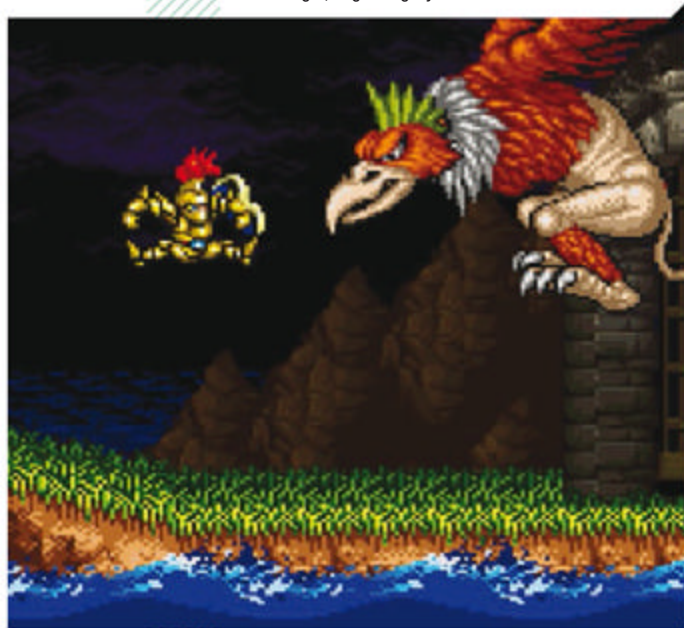
Recommended Titles: Super Mario Bros 3, Super Mario World, New Super Mario Bros.



The Double Jump

The only thing better than jumping in a platformer is to ignore the rules of physics and immediately jump again before you have even completed your first. The arcade title *Dragon Buster* is the acknowledged creator of the strange-if-you-think-about-it mechanic, but most gamers were introduced to this concept by Capcom's *Ghouls 'n' Ghosts*. Today, the double-jump is in most platformers, and has even invaded other genres like popular first-person shooters *Titanfall* and *Call of Duty: Advanced Warfare*.

Recommended titles: *Castlevania: Symphony of the Night*, *Rogue Legacy*



The Cinematic Platformer

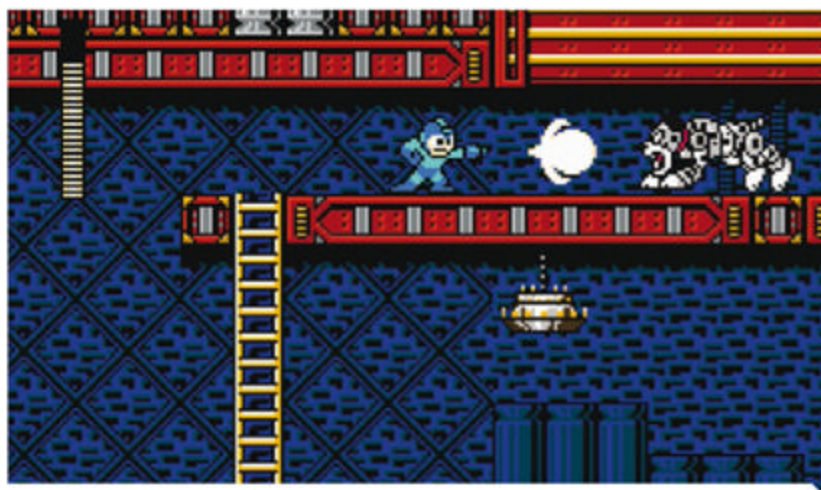
When *Prince of Persia* creator Jordan Mechner filmed his brother jumping around his backyard to use as animation in his new game, he probably didn't realize he was planting the seeds of a new platforming subgenre. The cinematic platformer embraces more realistic movement with its visuals and animation. Many games followed in the Prince's footsteps infusing

problem solving into a game type that typically only featured jumping. Games like *Out of this World/Another World*, *Heart of Darkness*, *Flashback*, and *Oddworld* can all be considered members of the genre.

Recommended titles: *Out of this World HD*, *Oddworld: New 'n' Tasty*, *Max: The Curse Of Brotherhood*, *Earthworm Jim*

SPEED TRIALS

It's not a platformer mechanic, or even an innovation in the genre, but speedrunning has become a hugely popular subset of platforming games. A speedrun can be done with any game, but platformers are particularly well-suited to the entertaining spectacle.

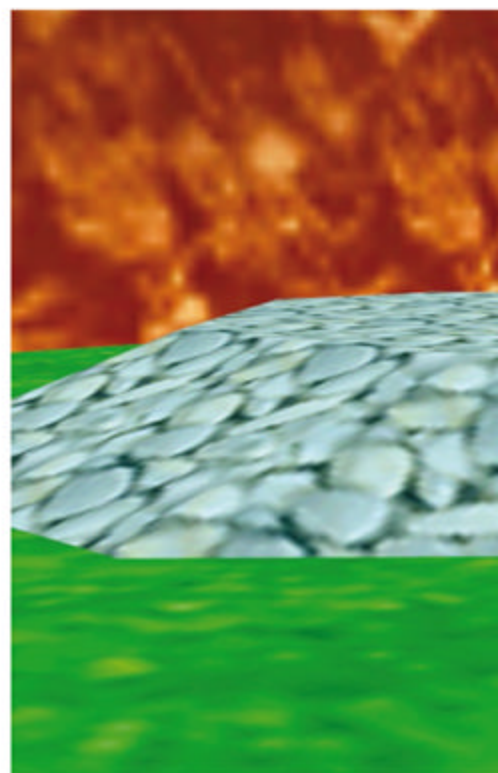


The Rise Of The Action Platformer

Sometimes platforming heroes need more than a jumping ability to defend themselves. Games like *Metroid*, *Contra*, and *Mega Man* added the ability to fire a projectile horizontally in front of you, while games like *Ninja Gaiden* and *Castlevania* gave players formidable melee weapons. The crossover of those action and combat mechanics coupled with the ability to jump proved hugely successful and are core mechanics of many platformers

today. The subgenre continued to evolve with titles like *Ratchet & Clank*, which infused an impressive collection of bizarre weapons into the 3D platformer. *Prince of Persia: Sands of Time* further challenged action platformer ideas by adding an assortment of atypical climbing and combat acrobatics.

Recommended titles: *Strider*, *Shovel Knight*, *Ratchet & Clank*, *Prince of Persia: Sands of Time*





Boss Fights

A staple that has appeared in one form or another in nearly every genre, the boss fight is crucial to many platformers. Boss fights are rooted in early Dungeons & Dragons RPGs and early shoot-em-ups, but platformers feature some of the best examples of the difficult obstacle at the end of the level. Castlevania and Mega Man in particular have some of the most varied and memorable boss battles in the business. The former features a cast of recognizable Hollywood monsters we've always dreamed of encountering, and the latter offers incredible incentives for bringing them down. Mega Man's influence helps to standardize the idea of game-changing rewards

(and experience in the case of RPGs) thanks to its mechanic of offering the boss' signature weapon for use upon defeat.

Bosses have grown tremendously in size and scope over the years, continuing to serve as important bookends for levels, or as is the case with games like Shadow of the Colossus and the upcoming Cuphead, the only obstacle of the experience. Bosses today often take far more than the simple three hits to the noggin' with long, drawn-out battles requiring you to chip away at a singular imposing enemy.

Recommended titles: Shovel Knight, Mega Man 9, Super Mario World 2: Yoshi's Island

The Explorers

Metroid and its follow-up Super Metroid popularized placing action platforming mechanics in a massive world where embracing and understanding the structure of your surrounding is just as important (and enticing) as being able to navigate it. Released a year prior to Metroid, Xanadu: Dragon Slayer II set the basic template for exploring an open platformer world. Seeing areas you can't access until you have a certain power-up, getting that power-up later, and backtracking to that attractive unlockable is a hugely effective mechanic. It's no wonder so many young developers who adored the Metroid formula are creating similar games. Furthering the idea of optional exploration, Kirby was an early example of being able to fly to the ceiling of a given level to take in the whole picture.

Recommended titles: Super Metroid, Guacamelee, Apotheon, Shadow Complex, La Mulana, Castlevania: Symphony of the Night



The Third-Dimension Revolution

Mario was not the first character to leap onto platforms in true 3D. Plenty of titles played with faux-3D ideas using tricks to offer a false impression of 3D space, but Alpha Waves, released in 1990, was the first to offer polygonal shapes moving in a polygonal world. Alpha Waves may have been the pioneer, but Mario was the innovator. Super Mario 64 took the platforming staples established with Mario's NES and SNES adventures and neatly slid them over to the Nintendo 64 in 1996. Power-ups, a diverse set of environments, and new wrinkles like framing diverse goals in the same level around the collection of stars became new staples for the genre. It was Nintendo's first foray into true 3D and set a gold standard by which all following 3D platform-

ers were and even continue to be judged. In retrospect, it's amazing to consider how well Nintendo executed on the game considering it was its first shot.

The year 1996 was a banner year for 3D platformers, as Crash Bandicoot and Tomb Raider released. Both used more traditional level structure for its challenges, but the latter focused on large levels with ample room for Lara's flying leaps. In a genre so dominated by Nintendo's decisions and practices, these two games dared to compete, as did Rayman when Ubisoft's adorable mascot went 3D with Rayman 2: The Great Escape in 1999.

Recommended titles: Prince of Persia: Sands of Time, Psychonauts, Sly Cooper and the Thievius Raccoonus

BUILD YOUR OWN ADVENTURE

LittleBigPlanet was not the first game to let the average player dabble in the art of building a video game. Early platforming titles like Lode Runner shipped with a level editor so you could build levels for challenging your friends. LittleBigPlanet's purist focus on platforming (at least initially) makes it one you can't ignore when discussing platforming level creation. Even Nintendo is letting players build their own platformer levels with the upcoming Wii U game, Mario Maker.

ADDING HALF A DIMENSION

In the overlap between moving away from two-dimensional graphics, but not quite knowing how to make a three-dimensional game, titles like *Clockwork Knight*, *Wild 9*, *Pandemonium*, *Klonoa*, and *Tomba* (among others) toed the platformer line while the industry transitioned. These games did little to change the core mechanics of the platformer, but they looked much different than those that came before them.

Collectible City

Discontent with only collecting stars in *Super Mario 64*, Rare took up the 3D platformer mantle by demanding players collect everything. Titles like *Banjo-Kazooie*, *Psychonauts*, and *Donkey Kong 64* and myriad other platformers extending into the PlayStation 2, Xbox, and GameCube generation all stuffed their levels with every kind of bauble and knick-knack you can imagine. Recent titles like *Sunset Overdrive* (a game that involves an impressive amount of jumping) and *Rayman Origins* similarly overstuffed their environments with multiple types of collectibles.

Recommended titles: *Sunset Overdrive*, *Banjo-Kazooie HD*, *Rayman Origins*



The Mascot Wars

Many platformers are known for their iconic protagonists. Characters like Mario, Sonic, and Crash Bandicoot were placed front and center as representatives for their consoles. They were the faces players based their purchasing decisions on. Mario was the innovator, Sonic was undeniably cool (at the time), and when Sony entered the fray, Crash Bandicoot's technical prowess was a great showcase

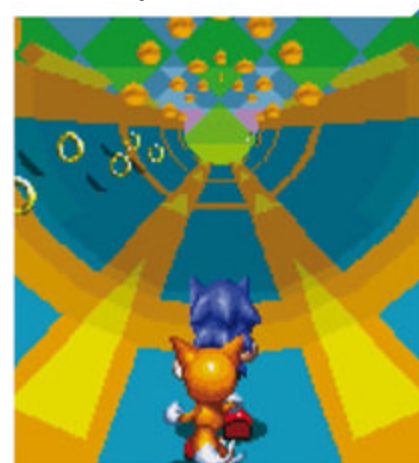
for the PlayStation. As player interest diverged and other genres took the spotlight, however, the mascots started falling by the wayside, but every once in a while a new face like *LittleBigPlanet*'s Sackboy comes on the scene.

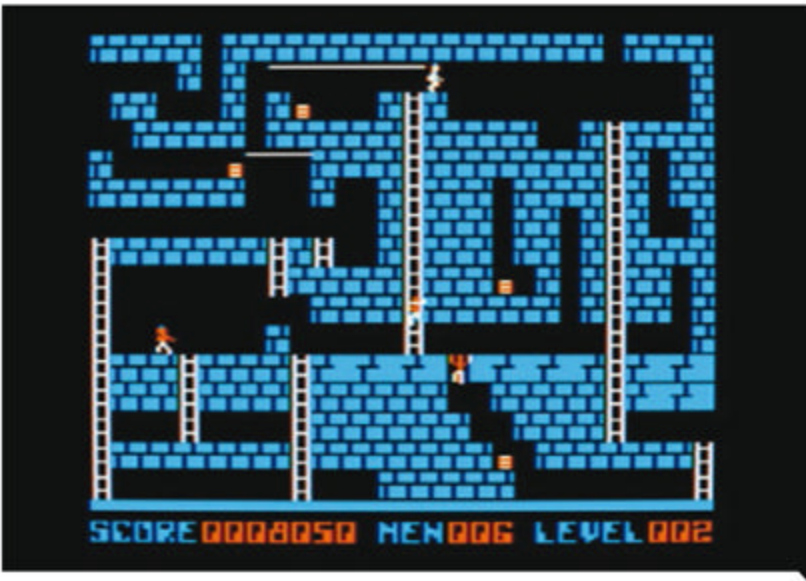
Recommended titles: *Super Mario World*, *Sonic The Hedgehog*, *Crash Bandicoot*, *Kirby: Triple Deluxe*, *LittleBigPlanet*

Better With A Friend

Super Mario Bros. let players take turns competing for progress and a better score, but something special clicked when you and a friend could work together leaping and climbing your way through levels. *Contra* players remember playing with their friends more than they remember the plot of the game, and modern platformers like *LittleBigPlanet*, *New Super Mario Bros.*, and *Rayman* are custom built to be played with someone sitting next to you. In the early '90s, Sonic let two players access platforms they couldn't get to alone by letting a second player, as Tails, carry Sonic to new areas.

Recommended titles: *Rayman Legends*, *Super Mario 3D World*, *LittleBigPlanet 2*





Puzzle Play

The platformer gels nicely with most mechanics, and one of the best pairings is with puzzles. Mid-'80s titles like Square's *Door Door* required players to trick aliens into entering doors across a series of platforms and *Lode Runner* required players to think ahead and establish their path to collect keys before making it to the end. Later, Blizzard's *The Lost Vikings* gave a collection of characters distinct abilities each necessary for making it through levels.

Today, the genre has become home to some of the most critically acclaimed games of the last few years with titles like *Braid* and *Fez*. They use the platformer's roots as one of video games' earliest and most successful genres to craft thoughtful experiences around the nature of game design and the ideas behind interactive entertainment.

Recommended titles: *The Swapper*, *Braid*, *Fez*, *Limbo*

First-Person Platforming

Platformers require an understanding of your full surroundings, not just what is immediately in front of you. The first-person perspective obscures the adjacent action and completely eliminates what's behind you. Despite this, titles like *Metroid Prime* and *Mirror's Edge* embrace the engrossing first-person perspective and successfully couple it with jumping.

Recommended titles: *A Story About My Uncle*, *Mirror's Edge*, *Metroid Prime*, *Dying Light*

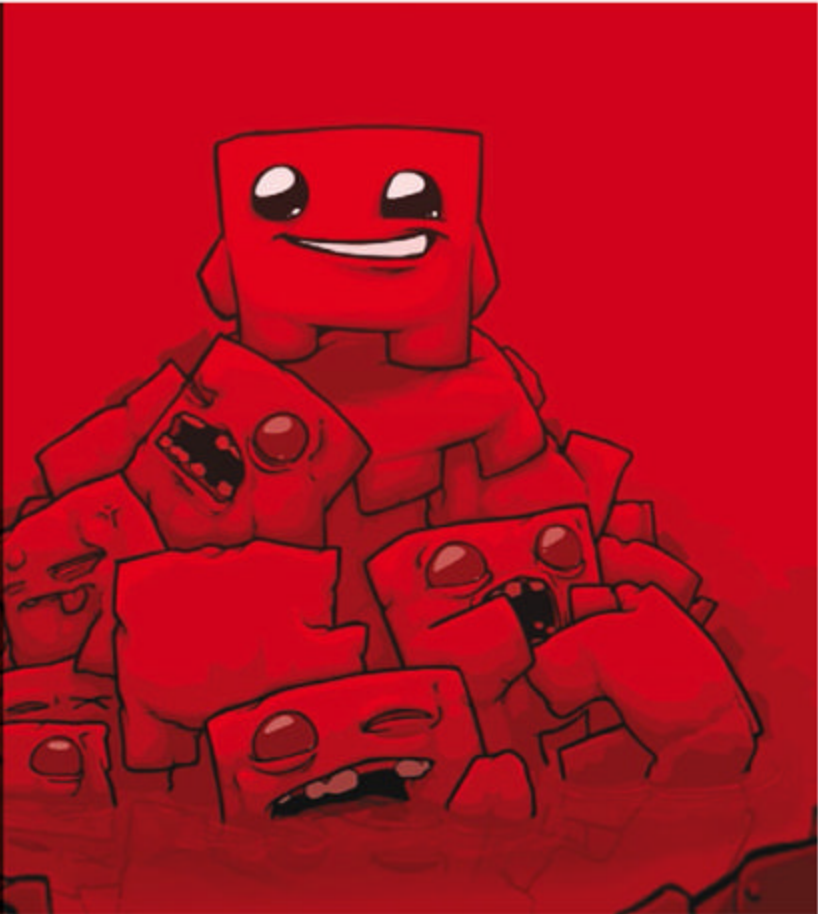


Platforming Brutality

Going back to NES games can be jarring for those who grew up in the age of unlimited lives and dynamic difficulty. Classics like *Ghost n' Goblins* are mercilessly difficult, and infamous challenges like *Battletoads'* hover bike level (a game that walks the line of platformer and beat 'em up) offered incredible bragging rights that live on to this day.

Difficult games were the norm in the past, but games started to get easier when platforming moved into 3D. It was about experiencing the world and collecting doodads as opposed to making sure your friends were in awe of your hand-eye coordination. Games like *N+*, *Donkey Kong Country Returns* and *Super Meat Boy* helped to foster a new returning age of difficult platformers like *1001 Spikes*, and *Spelunky*, which mercilessly test the player without apology. One of the main differences between then and now, regarding difficulty, is a focus on tight controls. Where in the past you might blame lag in pressing the jump button, today there is no one to blame but yourself for your jumping shortcomings. ♦

Recommended titles: *WWW*, *Spelunky*, *N+*, *1001 Spikes*, *Super Meat Boy*, *Donkey Kong Country: Tropical Freeze*



TOOLS OF THE TRADE

Grappling hooks and special jumpin' shoes are common items seen in video games today, but games like *DuckTales* and *Bionic Commando* originated the idea of using more than your feet to leave the ground in platformers. Scrooge McDuck's cane made a triumphant return recently with *DuckTales Remastered* and *Cranky Kong* used a cane in *Donkey Kong Country: Tropical Freeze*. *Bionic Commando Rearmed* proved the grappling hook could still be a fun mechanic and games like *Just Cause 2* (which isn't a platformer per se, but lets players spend nearly as much time in the air as they do on the ground) uses the grappling hook in often spectacular ways.

THE VIDEO GAME READING LIST

In recent years, video games have been taken more seriously by mainstream media and academia. It's not uncommon to see college professors teaching classes on video games as cultural artifacts, or to see games featured on the news or the couches of the late night talk shows. However, relative to other forms of media like film, literature, and music, there's still too little serious writing being done about games.

That's exactly why you should support the books on this list. It's a group that shows real diversity and depth – as well as some tremendous writing. If you're looking to learn more about the history of video games or expand your thinking about the art form, these books are a great place to start. If you can, also check out a similar feature in our June 2008 issue, which included a selection of other great game-oriented tomes.

by Matt Helgeson



All Your Base Are Belong To Us: How Fifty Years of Videogames Conquered Pop Culture

by Harold Goldberg

Goldberg, a longtime game journalist who's written for *Wired*, *New York Times*, and *Entertainment Weekly*, has added another to the shelf of indispensable game history books. Goldberg doesn't attempt to tell the complete story of video games, rather forming a larger picture from a series of in-depth examinations of everything from pioneering engineer William Higinbotham to modern-day classic like *BioShock* and *Grand Theft Auto III*.

Goldberg tackles a wide variety of important games and industry figures in a deeper, more writerly fashion. It's an excellently written and often affecting tribute to video games.



Of Dice and Men: The Story of Dungeons & Dragons and the People Who Play It

by David M. Ewalt

Though played with pen, paper, and dice, you could argue that there's no game that's had more influence on the history of video games than *Dungeons & Dragons*. Its mix of monsters, Tolkien-esque high fantasy, complex stat keeping, and random battle elements is reflected in nearly any RPG ever – or any game with upgrade trees and stats for characters. Ask most game developers, and you won't have to dig too far to uncover their personal history with the 20-sided die.

Author David Ewalt is among the D&D faithful, and brings a genuine, very personal enthusiasm to this history of the role-playing game. He's also a good journalist, and managed to dig up some important stories and facts regarding D&D's origins and invention – many of which will be new even to the most ardent players. D&D's history is populated by some extremely interesting characters, including creators Dave Arneson and Gary Gygax, making this a great read for anyone interested in the earliest roots of storytelling and role-playing within games.



Ready Player One: A Novel

by Ernest Cline

Clearly inspired by Neal Stephenson's cyberpunk classic *Snow Crash*, Cline's *Ready Player One* pulled a difficult trick for a novel inspired by video games and geek culture: It managed to earn widespread critical acclaim and sales. The book was a New York Times best seller, earning praise from a host of media outlets and the Alex

Award (for young-adult fiction) and the Prometheus Award (for science fiction).

The book tells the tale of Wade Watts, a young man who – like most of humanity – escapes his dreary reality in a virtual multiverse called OASIS. The legendary creator of OASIS left a series of hidden “Easter eggs” in the virtual-reality simulator before he died, stating that the first person to find all 20 would inherit his estate. Each egg is uncovered by puzzles that require a deep knowledge of ‘80s games, movies, and geek ephemera. What follows is a wild adventure and a book with a tight connection to game culture.



The Legend of Zelda: Hyrule Historia

by Patrick Thorpe (editor)

There's no video game franchise that has more sustained popular success and critical respect than The Legend of Zelda. Some would argue that the original NES game is the most important game in history, setting the stage for everything from Skyrim to Grand Theft Auto. *The Legend of Zelda: Hyrule Historia* is an

impressive collection of Zelda history and art aimed at the series dedicated fanbase.

The book was conceived for the 25th anniversary of the series, and features a foreword by series creator Shigeru Miyamoto. Part of the book deals with the making of The Legend of Zelda: Skyward Sword (the most current Zelda game at the time), while the rest delves deep into the franchise history, featuring a mother-lode of historical information, classic Zelda games, and concept and character art. It's an impressive collection.



Jacked: The Outlaw Story of Grand Theft Auto

by David Kushner

David Kushner's *Masters of Doom*, the story of id Software and the development of its legendary first-person shooter, is one of the great video game books. After turning his considerable writing skills to books on other topics, Kushner came back to video games to tell the story of another group of rebels who radically changed the industry.

Jacked: The Outlaw Story of Grand Theft Auto serves as a good primer on Rockstar Games and the people and events that led up to the blockbuster Grand Theft Auto III and its subsequent sequels. Kushner digs deep to unearth company emails regarding the events surrounding the “Hot Coffee” scandal, but Rockstar's notoriously tight-lipped nature means that it's not quite as revealing as *Masters of Doom*. Still, there is plenty of interesting new information here, as well as intelligent writing on Rockstar's unique vision and the importance of the GTA series.



Replay: The History of Video Games

by Tristan Donovan

Donovan delivers another general overview of video game history, building on the works of authors like Steven L. Kent (*The Ultimate History of Videogames*) and Leonard Herman (*Phoenix: The Fall and Rise of Videogames*). He's an experienced writer, and brings a deft touch to the subject. It's won critical praise in many corners as

being among the most polished books of its ilk.

Donovan also sets his book apart by focusing on the interesting history of the British game industry – something often left out by the usual Atari-oriented histories of gaming's early days. There was a lot going on across the pond, and Donovan sheds light on some important figures like Sir Clive Sinclair and his iconic Sinclair ZX80 and Spectrum home computers, which were the first computers owned by many British development luminaries.



For The Win

by Cory Doctorow

Doctorow brings his background as a tech blogger to the world of fiction, crafting critically acclaimed young adult science fiction novels that deal with the intersection of the Internet, video games, society, and economics. *For The Win* is set in a not-altogether-unbelievable near future in which kids from around the world spend their days competing in online games for virtual currency. Of course, just as in the non-virtual economy, third-world virtual “sweatshops” have evolved (not unlike the gold farming operations we've seen springing up in the real world), leaving many on the other side of the virtual boom.

The novel is a globe-spanning affair, tying together the stories of a group of young people from China to Southern California as they negotiate a treacherous world economy while helping to spearhead a new virtual labor movement.



I Am 8-Bit: Art Inspired by the Classic Videogames of the '80s

by Jon M. Gibson

If you're looking for a gorgeous, game-inspired coffee table book, look no further than *I Am 8-Bit*, a glossy, oversized book filled with works by a host of up-and-coming artists commissioned by the video game creative agency of the same name. The art on display is as varied as games themselves, drawing inspiration from myriad games and graphic design styles.

It's a well-curated book, and will likely have you searching for the artists' online sites to see if they have prints available for sale. It's nice to see game art being packaged with some love and intelligence – there's even a foreword by noted culture and music writer Chuck Klosterman (*Fargo Rock City*).

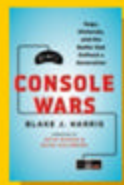


Rogue Leaders: The Story of LucasArts

by Rob Smith

April 3, 2013 was a sad day for the video game industry, with news coming down that new corporate parent company Disney had shuttered the venerable publisher and development house LucasArts. The company's rich history is preserved in *Rogue Leaders: The Story of LucasArts*, which strikes a balance between graphic-heavy coffee table book and historical tome.

George Lucas recognized the potential of video games early on, and – to its credit – LucasArts, for a time, managed to distinguish itself as much with original properties like Day of the Tentacle and Sam & Max as it did Star Wars-based titles (though there were more than a few classics in that franchise as well). The book delves deep into this history, featuring art, screenshots, and interviews with developers. It's a broad overview, so don't expect a lot of depth on any one title, but it's an essential collector's item for LucasArts fans.



Console Wars: Sega, Nintendo, and the Battle that Defined a Generation

by Blake J. Harris

Blake J. Harris' *Console Wars* details a battle that defined the game industry in the late '80s and early '90s, and shaped a generation of gamers. Though now the companies are known to cooperate on the Mario & Sonic series of Olympic games, Nintendo and Sega were once bitter rivals. Harris' book portrays this corporate war in cinematic detail, capturing a bygone era of the game industry in the process.

Harris has an eye for good characters, and his hero is Sega's Tom Kalinske. The gutsy former Mattel executive brought Sega into the mainstream by taking on Nintendo head-on – something many thought was impossible. This David vs. Goliath story of corporate intrigue is extremely compelling – so much so that actor Seth Rogan is helping to produce two films (a documentary and fictionalized version) based on the book. ♦

The Good



BETHESDA has announced its first-ever E3 press conference for Sunday, June 14 (also showing on Twitch). Hopefully this sets the stage for an announcement of Fallout 4, Elder Scrolls VI, or Dishonored 2. We'd take any or all of them.

Quotable

"The people who have helped and showed passion for Nintendo's community are the ones left in the dirt the most."



- YouTube superstar **PewDiePie** on Nintendo's Creator's Program, which recoups a percentage of ad revenue for users posting footage of certain Nintendo games

The Bad



ELECTRONIC ARTS

has canceled Shadow Realms, its 4 vs. 1 online multiplayer modern fantasy game by satellite studio BioWare Austin. The game clearly suffered from a lack of interest – even from the developer. In a post on the game's website, general manager Jeff Hickman said, "...Right now there are other projects for the team to work on within the BioWare studios for the coming year and beyond." BioWare Austin is working on content for Star Wars: The Old Republic, and the larger studio still has Dragon Age: Inquisition post-release content, a new IP, and the next Mass Effect in the works.

The Ugly

PETER MOLYNEUX'S

return to the god game genre he helped found, Godus, is in a state of confusion. A candid, public admission of doubt by a developer at 22 Cans, failure to fulfill Kickstarter rewards, and a change in servers necessitating an overhaul in the game have all affected the project. Molyneux's studio has even failed to communicate with Curiosity winner Bryan Henderson – who won the right to have god powers in the game for a length of time. ♦



FROM THE CREATOR OF VERONICA MARS

ZOMBIE

KICKING ASS AND TAKING BRAINS



SERIES PREMIERE MAR 17 TUES 9/8c



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Causes Of The Apocalypse

by Jeff Marchiafava



Hubris

As Seen In: Every post-apocalyptic game ever

There's no shortage of horrific doomsday scenarios in video games, but the best ones all stem from the same root cause. Whether it's an unexpected viral outbreak, a science experiment gone terribly wrong, or a good old-fashioned mushroom cloud, you can bet there's a stupidly arrogant human behind it. Will we ever learn?



Zombies - As Seen In: *Left 4 Dead*, *The Last of Us*, *Plants vs. Zombies*

Every gamer has lived through (or died during) the zombie apocalypse at least once. If you're lucky, you'll be dealing with old-school, reanimated shufflers and not victims of a slightly more plausible rabies-style super infection. In any event, if a game has "Dead" in the title, it's time to protect your brain.



War - As Seen In: *Fallout*, *Metro 2033*

"War never changes" jokes are almost as old as using a civilization-ending military conflict to explain a post-apocalyptic setting. Somehow Mutually Assured Destruction never seems to actually dissuade our leaders from blowing everything up (see entry #1), but as long as we rank among the survivors, we're not complaining. Turns out war is good for something after all.



Alien Invasion - As Seen In: *Half-Life 2*, *Destiny*, *Halo*, *Resistance*

Mankind has always dreamed of making contact with alien life, but the meet-and-greets never turn out well for players. Instead of a glowing finger or endearing speech impediment, video game E.T.s always show up brandishing advanced alien weapons, and are all too happy to show us how they work.



Robots - As Seen In: *Mass Effect*, *Xenogears*, *Robotron 2084*

Robots are an effective and beneficial addition to any advanced society — up to a point. That point is when they become self-aware, overwrite Isaac Asimov's Three Laws, and start murdering their meatbag oppressors. You'll know the firmware upgrades have gone too far when your robo-buddy's lights start glowing red.



Evil - As Seen In: *Doom II*, *Diablo*, *Darksiders*, *Shin Megami Tensei*

There's no apocalypse quite like the biblical apocalypse. Whether being ushered in by an army of demons, the four horsemen, or the dark prince himself, this classic style of in-game Armageddon serves up the penultimate good-versus-evil power fantasy — regardless of which side you're fighting for.



Celestial Impact - As Seen In: *The Legend of Zelda: Majora's Mask*, *Rage*, *Primal Rage*

Nukes are so overrated; nothing ends civilization like a rogue asteroid — or in the case of Majora's Mask, a creepy-faced moon. Id Software's *Rage* even detailed the hypothetical aftermath of real-life asteroid 99942 Apophis colliding with Earth in 2029. Talk about hitting too close to home...



Soda
As Seen In: *Sunset Overdrive*

Games have posited many causes for the downfall of civilization, most of which are understandably grim (what with the mass death and all). *Sunset Overdrive*'s colorful take on the apocalypse pins the blame on an energy drink, and the mutated beasts it spawns will have you swearing off caffeine in no time.



Flood - As Seen In: *Brink*, *The Legend of Zelda: The Wind Waker*

Rising water levels aren't the most exciting cause of an apocalypse, but they do produce some entertaining results as survivors fight over what little land remains. Not even cartoon Link is impervious to the devastating effects of a massive flood, but at least he's willing to make the best of life on the open sea.



The Internet Going Down
As Seen In: *Deus Ex*

The cause of the "Great Collapse" in *Deus Ex* may sound humorous, but what do you think would really happen if our entire communication grid came crashing down? Suddenly, we'd be unable to share cat pictures or complain about video games on the Internet! On second thought, we're ready for the apocalypse...



Syndicate Wars Gets Spiritual Sequel

by Matt Miller

Way back in 1996, PC gaming fans rejoiced when the subversive Syndicate received a sequel; Syndicate Wars continued the story of a dystopian future of mega-corporations and citizens under mind control. Years later, Starbreeze Studios tried its hand at a first-person shooter reboot; the game met with lukewarm reviews and left fans of the original strategy title out in the cold. After years away from the franchise, Syndicate Wars' lead Mike Diskett has brought together a new team at 5 Lives Studios to craft a follow-up to the two-decade lost cult hit, even if the name and setting are a little different.

Satellite Reign transports us to a similarly dystopian urban sprawl as its spiritual predecessor. "Governments have become nothing more than a façade," says animator Mitchell Clifford. "The real power lies with mega-corporations, who bend society to their will via wealth, power, and brute force." Players control an elite four-person team working for a smaller corporation, out to wrest control from its most powerful competitor, Dracogenics.

The game plays from a top-down isometric view. The in-fiction camera is a drone that gently floats above your characters, offering constant surveillance on their activities. Your squad freely roams a massive urban landscape, and everything from terminal hacking to gunfights play out in real time. The city is alive with pedestrians, futuristic cars, and animated billboards.

Each of the four squadmates are distinct character classes, with further customization options as you level them up. A soldier is your front-line option, rolling into battle with heavy weapons and the ability to take a beating. The

support role focuses on buffing and healing. The hacker taps terminals, shuts down cameras, and even takes control of civilian neural implants, heartlessly using them as human shields. Finally, the team describes the infiltrator as a stealth-focused "ninja-assassin."

"The classes themselves are more of a starting point and a flavor for each agent," says designer Chris Conte. Subsequent upgrades shape your team, and physical augmentations further specialize each squad member. "If we just look at the chest augmentations, the player may be able to purchase an augmentation that gives better health regeneration and greater max health, or one that enables breathing in poisonous gas without taking damage, or perhaps one with a highly volatile core that detonates once the agent dies," Conte says.

Satellite Reign's most intriguing feature is its commitment to sandbox play and player-crafted mission progression. "You could theoretically go straight to the final encounter and attempt to take on the [Dracogenics] CEO,

but you would be massively underpowered, underarmed, and under-augmented; you'd be likely to get your ass kicked," says programmer Mike Diskett. "The whole game is about the player arming up for the final assault." Players choose how to gather power and resources across the city, both through stated objectives and player-engineered situations. For instance, while it's never a stated objective, a player could assault the central CCTV hub and temporarily bring down surveillance before an important mission.

I dug into an early build of Satellite Reign, and even the early minutes left an impression of quality. Smart, simple mouse-and-keyboard controls are intuitive. The city background art is neon-drenched and atmospheric. Combat puts a high value on using cover and smart character placement, but since everything plays out in real time, demands you think fast. The missions I confronted often included multiple incursion points, and numerous options in regard to how aggressive or sneaky I needed to be. There are even some fascinating opportunities to use public perception and propaganda to shape the city, hacking billboards to reveal corporate secrets, and turning the normally placid populace into an angry mob. With the citizens banging at the front door, your sneaky entrance through the back might go unnoticed.

Satellite Reign is yet another small-team project that proves ambitious ideas don't need to come from big-name publishers. I'm excited to explore the whole city when it hits final release this summer on PC, Mac, and Linux. ✦

Looking for more independent games? Check out gameinformer.com/impulse for regular updates, previews, and reviews. For more in this issue, check out previews of *Adrift* (p. 62), *Salt and Sanctuary* (p. 68), *Darkest Dungeon* (p. 70), *Stranded Deep* (p. 74), *Armello* (p. 79), *Offworld Trading Company* (p. 80), and *The Hum: Abductions* (p. 81). We also have reviews of *The Escapists* (p. 89), *Apotheon* (p. 90), and *Sunless Sea* (p. 93).

OVERHEARD AT

“The time for computer games to be a waste of time or pastime is passed.

One hundred years ago, people played sports to prepare for a life of physical activity. When we play games, what are we preparing for? Most of what we do will happen in virtual worlds. We are preparing our children for a lifetime of virtual labor.”

— Tetris Online founder **Henk Rogers**

“We’re underperforming in compensation – in some cases by a lot relative to the average software engineer in tech. We underinvest in learning and development programs. We struggle to provide great long-term career paths, and we’re infamous for burnout. Why – is it because games are struggling to catch on in the broader media landscape? No, games are kicking ass. Our industry is kicking ass. It’s priorities. The sooner we prioritize people more aggressively, the more we drive innovation and bust through the barriers that we have as an industry.”

— Riot Games CEO **Brandon Beck**

“Sequels get pretty hard at some point because you have to change so much to even get over that little hump of change at all. But that’s the fun part of our jobs – coming up with new ideas.”

— Sledgehammer Games co-founder **Glen Schofield**

“The second thing people usually said when I told them I was working in the White House was, ‘oh, violence in video games.’ Those of us who have been in the industry a long time have had that exact same reaction. For 20 years we have been talking about violence in video games. The interesting part was I didn’t have to talk about violence in video games at all. It doesn’t seem to be that much of a concern. Or at least it never came up while I was there.”

— Former White House senior advisor for digital media **Mark Deloura**

“Some people in the franchise leadership were opposed to zombies and the idea. They thought it would be a disgrace to the franchise. There was a fear of doing something so off with such a successful brand.

It was inconceivable and arguably irresponsible.”

— Treyarch head **Mark Lamia** on the popular Call of Duty game mode that was almost canceled

DICE

Each year in February, the game industry's best and brightest gather in Las Vegas to share insights on how they have overcome challenges and found success. Here are some interesting ideas we heard bandied about. 💡

"Although the U.S. remains the nexus of game development, it seems like we've kind of lost our way when it comes to game curriculum. I've had the chance to talk to colleges and help with certain game curriculums, and unfortunately it seems that the **driving factor behind education at many colleges seems not driven by academics or imparting knowledge to students but instead by the growth of the industry, it's size,** and the capital brought in. Ultimately people want a part of it because there is money in it. It's kind of sad."

— Ready At Dawn co-founder
Ru Weerasuriya

"**Imagine a world in which a game designer is also a teacher, and vice versa.** They will guide students through testing and failing, theorizing and strategizing. [This idea is] not about software taking the place of teachers. Games won't solve issues like student-teacher ratios, but they will solve issues of engagement. A teacher without an expertise in game design will one day be considered unfit for the classroom."

— USC Game Innovation Lab director
Tracy Fullerton

"*The troubled launch of some big titles, including ours, and those attacks to the services and network service outages – **these are the new big things that keep me up at night.***"

— Sony Computer Entertainment president of worldwide studios **Shuhei Yoshida**

"**I'm not worried about gaming as much now.** Back in 2009, the industry was shrinking and it was bad. But there are so many indies that are growing now and thousands of new games."

— Electronic Arts chief creative director **Richard Hilleman** to VentureBeat

"**ESports** is still growing very rapidly. The overall audience for Twitch has basically doubled every year over the last four years, so eSports in my opinion is just scratching the surface. I think you're going to see this whole new generation of game developers try to build games for eSports."

— Twitch chief operating officer **Kevin Lin**

BUILDING THE PERFECT STYLISH ACTION GAME

Plenty of games feature heroes who take down bad guys with guns and swords, but not all of them do it with enough flair to stand alongside the likes of *Devil May Cry* and *Bayonetta*. The barriers defining the stylish action (also known as “character action”) genre are a bit fuzzy; the games usually feature weapon-centric combat with a focus on chaining together combos. However, they also have a mix of flashiness and depth that elevates the intensity above typical action fare. The genre is small, but it remains prominent. With last year’s release of *Bayonetta 2*, plus the remastered editions of *DmC* and *Devil May Cry 4* on the horizon, we decided to dissect our favorite elements and assemble them into the ideal stylish action experience.

by Joe Juba

STORY

HEAVENLY SWORD

Narratives in this genre are usually a complete joke, serving only as a vehicle for the combat – but that doesn’t need to be the case. *Heavenly Sword* demonstrates that you can tell a compact story with likeable characters, all while delivering on the action. We want a tale that is understandable and satisfying; not every plot needs a bunch of nonsensical twists and superfluous side characters.



PLAYABLE CHARACTERS

DEVIL MAY CRY 4

Controlling additional characters is always cool, but they don’t often feel much different from the main hero. *DMC 4* features the contrasting styles of Nero and Dante, legitimately giving players a new way to approach combat. Nothing puts a fresh spin on familiar enemies like finding inventive and effective ways to defeat them as a different character.



VISUALS AND SPECTACLE

GOD OF WAR 3

The *God of War* series may not be the most demanding in this genre, but you can’t top the presentation. The graphics and effects are amazing, and the jaw-dropping scale and setpiece moments keep the surprises coming. These elements shouldn’t overshadow the core combat, but cool one-off sequences and great cutscenes are rewarding ways to punctuate the basics.



PRECISION

NINJA GAIDEN

Team Ninja’s proficiency in the fighting genre shines through in the Xbox reboot of *Ninja Gaiden*. Incredibly responsive mechanics give you total control over battlefield – and when you mess up, you can only blame yourself. The intimidating difficulty of *Ninja Gaiden* doesn’t need to carry over, but a game that discourages mindless button-mashing is a must.

BOSS FIGHTS

METAL GEAR RISING: REVENGEANCE

Revengeance hits the sweet spot when it comes to the big encounters. You don’t need to chip away at the bosses endlessly, but you need to practice and stay at the top of your game if you want to emerge victorious. Plus, bosses demand different strategies, so you can’t lean on the same skills that carried you before. That’s the way it should be: pleasantly challenging, but not unforgiving.





ATMOSPHERE

CASTLEVANIA: LORDS OF SHADOW

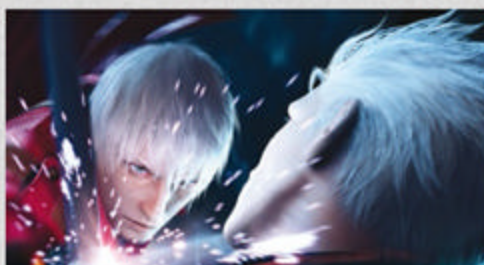
Our ideal stylish action game wouldn't necessarily mimic Lords of Shadow's distinct gothic fantasy vibe, but the key element is consistency. The music and visuals come together to deliver a pervasive and grim atmosphere. Even with plenty of different environments, the tone carries over from one to the other. This kind of unified vision is critical when creating an immersive setting.



CO-OP

BAYONETTA 2

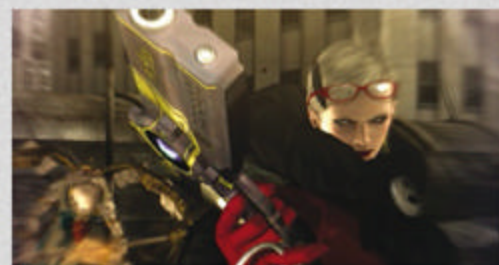
Stylish action titles are balanced for single-player mayhem, and that's how it should be. However, co-op still has a place, and that's where Bayonetta 2 gets it right; the main story is a perfectly tuned solo experience, but a separate co-op mode lets you experience the joy and novelty of fighting side-by-side with another player in arena-style encounters.



WEAPONS & PROGRESSION

DEVIL MAY CRY 3: SPECIAL EDITION

The ability to invest in different combat styles (in addition to maneuvers for specific weapons) makes DMC 3 one of the best and most customizable examples of the genre. Some of the options are weird, some are cool, but they are all worth exploring. The lesson? Experimentation is fun, and the more options players have, the deeper they can dive.



POST-GAME

BAYONETTA

Players love additional content like special costumes, secret weapons, and hidden boss fights unlocked by replaying missions. Bayonetta provides it all, allowing players to continue developing their skills with an array of activities after the credits roll. Plus, since you retain all of your progress and upgrades, you never have to start over from square one – a must-have feature to increase replayability.



COMBAT FLOW

DMC

Ninja Theory's take on Devil May Cry gives you easy access to a massive arsenal of devastating moves. Dante can use a different array of demonic and angelic abilities with a simple press of a shoulder button. The key here is ease and flexibility; DmC lets you unleash a dazzling and varied string of attacks, but artfully avoids anything that interrupts the fluidity of the action. ♦



MMO Status Report

New titles are few and far between, but existing games continue to evolve in intriguing ways

MMOs continue to truck along as a genre giant, with some of the traditionally PC-centric titles making their way to current-gen consoles. While we may not see many new MMOs coming on the scene in 2015, existing titles are constantly evolving – some with a few tweaks, others with major changes and new expansions. While free-to-play models have become a major force, subscription and

buy-to-play services still exist, offering players as much variety in their payment plans as there is in game content. Some trends are emerging as these games evolve – player housing, once a luxury feature in the genre, can now be found in many titles. If you’ve never played a MMO or are thinking about taking a look at some of the other options, here are some titles that keep pushing out compelling content long after launch.

by Daniel Tack

Atlantica Online

- » **What It is:** A turn-based tactical MMORPG that blends real-world locations with mythical and fantasy elements.
- » **How It's Evolved:** Atlantica Online is unique in the MMORPG space, as players control not one but a full team of nine mercenaries as they participate in turn-based tactical combat, as opposed to the traditional tab-target or action templates. Since launch, Atlantica Online has added a slew of new mercenaries to choose from, streamlined the early levels to better accommodate new players, offered player housing, and added special dungeons that take things even further on the tactical level. Instead of just issuing commands, players have to move units around on the field to get in range, introducing additional positional elements to the mix. If you're looking for something truly different in the MMORPG realm, Atlantica might suit your needs.
- » **What's Next:** We can expect more ways to ease new players into the game, new quests and zones, more dungeons and raids, and new mercenaries.



The Elder Scrolls Online

- » **What It is:** A fantasy MMORPG set in the world of the popular Elder Scrolls franchise.
- » **How It's Evolved:** Elder Scrolls Online has kept busy since launch. Developer ZeniMax Online has made some changes to make combat feel better, added more activities and progression for level 50 players to engage in, shifted toward a buy-to-play model, and built new zones and dungeons. The studio has also introduced a criminal justice system that lets players interact more with their surroundings much like they would in a single-player Elder Scrolls game.
- » **What's Next:** ESO's swap to a buy-to-play model comes with a smattering of changes to the game as it prepares for its console debut. Check out more on page 69.

Eve Online

- » **What It is:** A massive player-driven space universe filled with drama, intrigue, and legendary battles.
- » **How It's Evolved:** Eve Online has continually changed since launch, not only through its community-driven legendary battles and shady backdealings in the outer reaches of the galaxy, but through big additions to the gameplay. The introduction of the game's PLEX (Pilot License Extension) system allows both subscriber and free-to-play players to participate based on their in-game resources – a system that other games have since picked up. The massive corporations (similar to guilds or clans in other games) were simply not big enough to handle the large-scale warfare and rivalries of Eve, so Alliances were rolled out to allow for giant masses of corporations and pilots to own starbases and other essential properties. This all comes with the introduction of many new ships, wormholes, exploration gameplay elements (for players that don't feel like participating in mining, trading, or pirating), and revamped graphics.
- » **What's Next:** Eve is constantly shifting due to player interactions with the game, but we can expect new ships and more tools that give players the power to shape the universe.





Final Fantasy XIV: A Realm Reborn

» **What It Is:** A fantasy MMORPG set in the universe of Final Fantasy, complete with job-swapping and more Chocobos than you can shake a Phoenix Down at.

» **How It's Evolved:** The story of FF XIV is an interesting one. After a lackluster launch, Square completely scrapped and remade it, resulting in the aptly named A Realm Reborn. Since launch, the reboot has added a number of new classes, player/guild housing, dungeons, and primal battles that allow players to team up with guildmates to take on serious challenges.

Players can join random pick-up groups to tackle everything from the hilarious but deadly Good King Moogle Mog to traditional Final Fantasy staples like the lightning-wielding Ramuh or a tense ship-battle with the great Leviathan.

» **What's Next:** The upcoming first official expansion, Heavensward, is expected to launch this year and offers a glut of additional adventure and an increased level cap. Big ticket new classes like Astrologian, Machinist, and Dark Knight are coming alongside options for flight. Guilds will gain the ability to create their own airships in addition to flying mounts and a new race. Final Fantasy XIV: A Realm Reborn also has the distinction of being one of few major MMORPGs available on PlayStation consoles as well as PC.

Guild Wars 2

» **What It Is:** ArenaNet's high fantasy world filled with Lovecraftian dragons and warring factions uses the concept of a living world to constantly keep things in flux with events and massive changes through an evolving story.

» **How It's Evolved:** Guild Wars 2 has never been afraid of taking a creative approach to content. The philosophy of a living world has allowed players to participate in events that have lasting, permanent effects on the game world, including the destruction of a major city. The constant content rollouts have historically allowed the story to be told in bits and pieces over time.

» **What's Next:** ArenaNet's approach to evolving Guild Wars 2 is changing this year with the release of Heart of Thorns, the first proper expansion. Thorns allows players to take their characters in new directions via a mastery system (a take on "alternate advancement" over increasing the level cap) and new specializations available to each class, allowing them to use different weapons and play in completely different ways. These new skills, along with a new heavy armor class called Revenant that can grant buffs to players and weave through the mist, should bolster players as they explore the Heart of Maguuma. This gigantic, three-tiered jungle area offers a smattering of new activities and bosses. Competitive play is also receiving a healthy overhaul with the addition of new World vs. World objectives and a new competitive match type. Heart of Thorns is expected to roll out sometime this year.



Landmark

- » **What It is:** An open-world fantasy set sandbox for players to craft, collect, claim, create, and combat.
- » **How It's Evolved:** Daybreak's Landmark is setting the stage for the long-awaited EverQuest Next. When early alpha rolled out, there wasn't much to do except collect ore, harvest trees, craft basic tools, and build things. Some of the early player creations were breathtaking to behold, but significant changes over the course of Landmark's development have given way to a new game featuring monsters, player advancement, ruins, caves, weapons, armor, and PvP.
- » **What's Next:** Since players have free reign in terms of creation and design, some of the dungeons, castles, and landscapes they have created will make their way into EverQuest Next when the ambitious MMORPG eventually launches. Landmark is unique in the fact that while it's essentially an EverQuest Next test bed, it's also a fully-functioning MMORPG with a heavy focus on creation and experimentation – which might just be the perfect fit for those looking for a world lacking NPC dialogue and quests.



Neverwinter

- » **What It is:** A Dungeons & Dragons-based action MMORPG.
- » **How It's Evolved:** Neverwinter has seen many traditional content boosts since launch in the form of new dungeons, zones, and classes. With the Elemental Evil expansion launching on PC in March, new zones are available themed around the elements (air, earth, fire, water) and tie into the tabletop inspiration behind the game. A new level cap and the Paladin tank/healer class rolled out with Elemental Evil, and if you're a Baldur's Gate fan there's a neat little extra waiting for you as well – Minsc and Boo as important new NPCs to interact with!
- » **What's Next:** Potentially even more exciting than the new content update, Neverwinter is bringing its action-focus to Xbox One in late March. While many MMORPGs don't have systems that play friendly with console controller sensibilities, Neverwinter could be a strong fit in a genre that's slowly and surely expanding to the console space.



Rift

- » **What It is:** A fantasy MMORPG set in a world where unpredictable Rifts create dynamic gameplay from the early game to endgame.
- » **How It's Evolved:** Since Rift's launch, it's transitioned to the free-to-play model and added a ton of new options to explore. From the "instant adventure" feature that allows players to hop into an infinite questing loop to highly customizable player housing, Rift has a lot going on. Instant adventure lets players skip the doldrums of questing that often associate the rise to level-cap, while creating engaging group settings from a random assortment of player. Players of all levels can find useful rewards in instant adventure mode, with a system in place to "level down" high-level characters while they adventure in low-level zones. The concept and execution of instant adventures might be one of the coolest things I've seen in the modern MMORPG, allowing for a fluid, instant casual "questing" experience with random folks without the potential boredom of chain-running the same dungeon over and over again.
In addition to new souls allowing for new class creation, Trion Worlds has also added a minion system that lets players send out an army of pets to collect resources, crafting materials, housing decorations, and more. The recent Nightmare Tide expansion introduced Nightmare Rifts, which take the concept of Rifts to a new level. Instead of having a set finale, players can battle these Rifts until they can no longer handle the creatures and bosses and receive appropriate rewards for how long they can survive against the infinite tides.
- » **What's Next:** Expect more upgrades to many of the customization systems, including a wardrobe loadout that will let players access their entire closet full of specialty costumes without having to worry about inventory management. Look forward to an increased emphasis on group-centric pick-up gameplay that Rifts and instant adventures encourage.

Star Wars: The Old Republic

- » **What It is:** A story-driven MMORPG set in the Star Wars universe.
- » **How It's Evolved:** Since release, many changes have come to Star Wars: The Old Republic including endgame content that was lacking on release, easier travel, player housing, and galactic conquest – a system that allows guilds to control actual planets. The latest expansion pack, Shadows of Revan, introduces solo flashpoints with a heavy focus shifting back to story-driven content. While instanced dungeons have always been an important part of the game, sometimes you're just not up for getting a group together to punch one out, even with a handy looking-for-group system. Revan introduced single-player instances to the game, allowing players "dungeons on demand" that are designed for solo encounters. Large-scale events have also come into play since release, with invasions and bounty hunting available for those interested in dynamic events.
- » **What's Next:** After Shadows of Revan, BioWare's efforts will likely be directed toward bringing the story back into the focus of the game's scope, alongside all the expected new quests, dungeons, raids, and events.



TERA

- » **What It is:** An action-oriented fantasy MMORPG.
- » **How It's Evolved:** Like several other titles on this list, TERA has transitioned from a subscription model to free-to-play over the years. A ton of content has come online since its launch in 2012. Raids, PvP castle sieges, a slew of new dungeons (along with revamps for old ones), an Alliance system that lets players sign on to one of three factions to battle for the top slot, weekly tournaments, a new scythe-wielding class, and more flesh out some of the enhancements. The first expansion, Fate of Arun, launched in December last year, which increased the level cap to 65 and added new dungeons and zones.
- » **What's Next:** A new airship dungeon, Sky Cruiser Endeavor, launched in late February.





Vindictus

- » **What It is:** A slick, combat-driven MMORPG from Korea with instanced dungeon crawls. Some aspects of the game are similar to the Monster Hunter franchise.
- » **How It's Evolved:** Nexon and developer devCAT have made a ton of changes to the game since its introduction. While players were originally limited by coins to seek voyage on ships to access various dungeons, those restrictions were removed early on, and the title has added new dungeons, raids, lots of new classes and new abilities for old ones, and ways to experience those offerings through pick-up groups and clans. The game has a distinct action play style with almost no HUD elements to get in the way, focusing on combos and special abilities without need for screen-hungry hotbars.
- » **What's Next:** We expect to see more classes come into play alongside new quests, dungeons, and raids. Vindictus also seems like a surefire winner for the console segment should it ever decide to move past its PC roots.

WildStar

- » **What It is:** A sci-fi MMORPG with a focus on action and mobility.
- » **How It's Evolved:** WildStar has seen a number of updates since launch in the form of drops – content packs that often include new areas, encounters, and challenges. WildStar's focus on punishing raiding, cool player housing, and a combat system that keeps players active over the tab-target model has been bolstered by these drop rollouts that often include activities for players of all engagement levels. While WildStar's initial raid attunement system and difficult dungeons presented barriers for endgame players not willing to commit to raiding guilds, recent updates have offered a solid portion of late game content that allows players of many different play styles to grab cool new decorations, mounts, and gear through solo- and group-oriented zone challenges.
- » **What's Next:** Expect more solo and group content, content offered in more forgiving, 30-45 minute chunks, new ways to customize characters, and a focus on fleshing out the endgame for a variety of play styles. Carbine Studios is also eyeing upgrades to the looking-for-group system, training dungeons to help acclimate players for the more brutal crawls, and a shift in the 40-person dungeon to a 20-person trek.



World of Warcraft

- » **What It is:** This accessible fantasy MMORPG set in the popular Warcraft universe has led the genre since its debut in 2004. In the decade since, no game has managed to unseat it as the most popular MMO in the country.
- » **How It's Evolved:** World of Warcraft is basically unrecognizable today compared to its launch iteration. Throughout the years, Blizzard has refined and evolved the looking-for-group system that allows players to dive into a dungeon in mere moments. Streamlining talents and specializations has made for an experience that doesn't require investigation or planning to get into; simply pick a class and spec, and your abilities will follow suit. With the latest expansion, Warlords of Draenor, players can now choose to tackle endgame content at whatever level of engagement they wish, from a quick 20-minute casual raid via the looking-for-raid tool to a challenging specialty adventure on Mythic difficulty. If a quick eyes-closed raid or heroic hardcore efforts aren't your thing, fear not – normal and heroic difficulties flesh out the roster of available options, allowing endgame content to be seen and enjoyed by all. Alongside new Garrison housing, players can now recruit a host of followers that can go out on missions for them when they're not even playing, bringing back everything from gold to gear. With new legendary objectives for players to strive for and new raids like Blackrock Foundry, World of Warcraft is in a healthy position for players old and new alike. If you're just getting started, a modified tutorial that teaches you how to use your abilities awaits you with your brand-new level 90 boosted character, allowing you to jump right in the game at current-level content without being overwhelmed by a slew of skills and hotbars.
- » **What's Next:** Expect more dungeons, more raids, and (probably) more races and classes, as Blizzard continues to take us to new places in the expansive Warcraft universe. ♦

interview



photo: Jaasn Henry

A Crowdsourced Hit

Starting with a single tweet asking for input on a simple game demo, **Mike Mika** and Other Ocean's #IDARB eventually became a social media sensation, allowing his followers to make suggestion and changes to the game. We recently spoke to Mika about #IDARB and his career.

interview by Matt Helgeson

You strike me as a childhood hacker. Was that how you got on the path to game development?

Yeah, that is. My parents used to shop at K-Mart. They would take hours shopping so I would wander around trying to find things to do. They had a Commodore 64 and books about programming in the computer section. Because I would spend so much time in the store, I started to teach myself Commodore 64 programming from the books that were there, on the Commodore 64. I would take the time that they were shopping and try to make a complete game. One time when my dad came to pick me up, he was asking what I was playing and I was like, "Well, this is my version of Moon Patrol," and he said, "What do you mean, your version?" I'm like, "I made it." So a week later we had a Commodore 64 and it just took off from there.

I wanted to touch on your Donkey Kong project. Your daughter wanted to play as Pauline, and you hacked the game to do that. Can you talk about how that happened and your reaction to how viral that went?

That was a really weird time. When she was three or four, my daughter first started playing Donkey Kong. She was actually pretty decent at Donkey Kong. I thought it would be really fun to introduce her to the rest of the Mario games. She wasn't quite as good at those games, which I think are actually easier than arcade Donkey Kong, but one thing she really liked about Super Mario Bros. 2 was being able to play as Princess Toadstool.

When we went back to Donkey Kong, the first thing out of her mouth was, "I wanna play as the girl." I was like, "Well, you can't – she's not in this one." That night, it kept sticking in my head. I was thinking, "This is my job, I'm supposed to be able to do stuff like this. The next night I started to just hack away at it; I was up all night because it was so fun. By morning, the game was done. All the while I was posting updates, and friends of mine like [Sony VP of publisher and developer relations] Adam Boyes were following it on Facebook and asked if they could post it in other places. I said to go ahead; I didn't think anything of it. The "other places" being Reddit, which I didn't know anything about at the time because I was so busy on other stuff. The next day, I had to go to this charity event for my son's school. While we were there I kept fighting the urge to pick up my phone because it kept buzzing, and I knew I was getting text messages. By Monday, people were trying to find me. Because my dad has the same name as me, my parents were getting phone calls from *Good Morning America*,

CNN, and stuff like that. My mom would call me up and say, "You should call these guys back, they're super nice." I was like, "Ugh, I really didn't expect this at all."

Your latest game, #IDARB, has a retro feel. You can see the influence of games like Smash TV. There are so many games being released that have pixel-art and an old-school feel, be it Minecraft or Super Time Force. Why do you think that retains such popularity?

I actually haven't put my finger on it. When I started making #IDARB, I just wanted to get back to what I felt like to make games on the Commodore 64, [when] I would get all my friends in the neighborhood to come by and give me ideas. In modern game development, it's really hard to be organic because you have fixed schedules, fixed budgets, and a lot of pressure to succeed. You have so many cooks in the kitchen and you tend to try and play it as safe as possible. If there is something that works you just stick with it.

As #IDARB was coming together, it fit the scale and scope of what I could afford to do in my spare time. I was taking ideas from the Internet, but I had other stuff going on in the studio during the day. I'd put the kids to bed, get my laptop out, and start working on it. It was like the ultimate puzzle – anything that someone would throw at me [on Twitter] would become "how can I implement that in a way that makes it still fun and doesn't break anything that kind of works at this point?" The simplicity was kind of the thing that came out of the need to iterate. Because I kept it so simple, I could throw away half of a game design and put a new interpretation of that back in in a matter of a day or two and you're able to play it. I think the result of that is it's a very fast game; if we got any more complicated than that we would start to lose players, even more than you do in the game right now.

How much of the game in the end was your team's vision, and how much was provided by the crowd?

It's weird because I tried to actually quantify this before because some ideas that came to us were so important that they made up for the rest of the game. The feel of the mechanics were the team, myself, and anyone else who contributed here. But the game changers during development – like adding the ball to the game, penalty boxes, the fizz hat flies you around the map, and things like that – all of it came from suggestions online or while we were showing the game. When we took the game to GDC last year we got a lot of feedback – I'd say half the game features probably came from there.

With features like "hashtag bombs" #IDARB is clearly made with not only

the players, but the viewers in mind. How much was that influenced by the popularity of Twitch or YouTube streaming?

When I started this game way back in January of last year, I knew a lot about Twitch, but I didn't engage very much. I was very new to Twitter as well. While I was working on the game, my seven-year-old son was obsessed with watching Minecraft videos and Twitch livestreams of Minecraft. All his friends were obsessed with it, and I started to understand the magnitude of that. I also knew that by working with a lot of other companies that it was a huge blind spot.

While I was developing #IDARB we were pitching other games and incorporating livestreaming – giving people the ability to broadcast games, spectator modes, and the idea of hash bombs through Twitter or Twitch. It would be one of these things where we would get in there and the meeting would go great and they'd say, "This idea is great, but we really don't understand the Twitch and Twitter stuff so can we cut that out?" or "That sounds expensive." That stuff fell back naturally to #IDARB, which was one of those outlets where we could do it and not be told no. It was probably when we first tested the hash bombs that we looked at each other – Kevin Wilson is my partner in crime on this game – and it really felt like a magic moment. We were sitting here entering things on our phone and we were watching things happen in the game. We realized that the engagement for someone who was broadcasting with their audience can now be tied together.

In your future projects, do you foresee working with a crowd sourcing element to your design? Do you think this translates to different genres or game types or was this sort of lightning in a bottle?

The big thing that we are talking about doing next is taking the idea a little bit further. We don't know if it's lightning in a bottle or not, to be honest. I've been making games for 20 years, and I've never experienced a success followed by another success because we just repeated it. This has probably been the easiest project, [because] I felt confident that what we were doing was at least fun and that people would enjoy it. I can attribute that to the fact that we shared this game to the best we could with the audience. There [were] random people who surprisingly understood what we were doing with it and made these incredible, thoughtful suggestions. It reminded me of the old Interplay line, "By gamers, for gamers." There were many times when an idea would come in and I would disagree with it, but I would shout it out to the studio here and be like, "I don't think this is going to work," and someone else would say, "It would if we did this." We would debate it and even implement it. I was more willing at the time, since I felt this was a grand experiment. ♦

CAREER HIGHLIGHTS

1984

K-MART HACKER

Mika uses the Commodore 64 computers at K-Mart to begin experimenting with programming

1996

SCI-FI DREAMS

Graduates with an English degree from Wayne State University, where he had initially studied film, hoping to create films like *Star Wars*

1998

NEXT GEN

Looking for a break in the game industry, Mika moves to California to work as a writer at *Next Generation* magazine

1998

IT'S BLITZ!

Mika's first game as a professional developer, Digital Eclipse's GBA port of NFL Blitz, is released

2003

MERGERS & ACQUISITIONS

Digital Eclipse merges with children's software company ImaginEngine to form a new super-studio, Backbone Entertainment

2005

DEATH BECOMES HIM

Backbone, which specializes in ports and licensed games, releases *Death Jr.*, a rare original IP for PSP. Mika serves as the creative director

2005

RESPECT MY CONGLOMERATE

Backbone merges again, this time with The Collective, to form a new company called Foundation 9

2009

FREEDOM

Foundation 9's Canadian studio is spun off to form an independent company, Other Ocean Interactive

2014

SOCIAL PHENOMENON

Mika tweets a photo of a new demo, writing "Where to go with this? I've started a new project, it draws a red box. Thinking platformer."



ALIENWARE AREA-51

For decades, computers have been rectangular cubes. While the guts of the PC have changed immensely over the years, its basic form hasn't evolved much. Leave it to the company with an out-of-this-world name to start rethinking that box. Not only does this massive gaming rig feature some striking curves, it has enough horsepower to laugh at today's biggest games.

This unique triad chassis serves to do a couple things. First, it allows the computer to run cooler by pushing air away from any walls it might be pressed up against. Second, it makes it easier to rock the entire system forward and access a bevy of I/O ports. Impressively, the Area-51 is as ergonomic on the inside as it is outside. Tech nerds and engineers will love how much room this machine leaves for upgrading – supporting up to three full-length doublewide graphics cards and five different hard drives.

The Area-51 is also impressive where it really matters: performance. Our configuration housed a liquid-cooled 4th Generation Intel Core i7 Processor overclocked up to 3.8 GHz as well as an Nvidia GeForce GTX 980 with 4GB GDDR5 (Alienware also offers models with triple Nvidia GeForce GTX 770 graphics cards). Games like Far Cry 4, Evolve, and The Witcher 2 proved to be no challenge; this behemoth played everything we threw at it as if warming up for a real workout. Meanwhile, our model turned out a 3DMark score of 5713 all while purring like a quiet kitten.

If you've already jumped onboard the 4K movement then you might want to buy two more 4K monitors, because the Area-51's highest configurations allow it to display games in a 11520x2160 resolution across three 4K monitors.

Alienware's Area-51 may be easy on the eyes, but it's hard on the bank account. Anyone less than a hardcore PC gamer will likely discover that this is a more powerful machine than they really need. So while we appreciate its technical prowess, only the true enthusiasts need apply.

SUPERB 

\$2,649 | alienware.com

1



1 Thrustmaster T300RS Racing Wheel

Thrustmaster's latest force-feedback wheel – the first compatible with PS4 – is an impressive piece of tech, providing responsive steering on calm stretches of road and arm-straining resistance when needed. We appreciated the wheel's 1080-degree range of rotation. Little touches like the high-quality rubberized wheel go a long way towards justifying the \$400 price tag. Unfortunately, the pedal assembly feels flimsy, as though it was cribbed from a lower-tier model. Currently, game compatibility is limited to Driveclub, F1 2015, Project Cars, and The Crew. A load of PS3 and PC games are compatible, but PS4 owners will have to be patient. It's a solid wheel overall, so if you're a racing fan who knows about the current software limitations, it's worth mounting onto your dashboard.

\$399 | thrustmaster.com

2 Gaming Heads Liara Statue

Much like BioWare's blue-skinned race, our affection for Mass Effect's resident Prothean researcher never seems to die. Dressed in her Mass Effect 3 gear, this Gaming Heads statue of Liara T'Soni measures 19 inches tall and comes with swappable hands that allow her to hold a weapon and fire off biotic energy.

\$339 | gamingheads.com

2



GAME OF THRONES: SEASON 4

HBO's award-winning adaptation of George R.R. Martin's A Song of Ice and Fire series is one of the most captivating and pulse-pounding shows on television. In season four, a few plotlines come to bloody conclusions, but the larger story is just ramping up.

\$39.96
hbo.com/game-of-thrones

PORCO ROSSO

After World War I, flying ace Porco is turned into a pig and decides to become a bounty hunter, taking on a gang of menacing sky pirates. This hilarious-yet-touching film from renowned animator Hayao Miyazaki comes to Blu-ray for the first time.

\$24.94
movies.disney.com/porco-russo

PROTOMEN – THE COVER UP

The American rock band famous for their electric operas based on Mega Man returns with an entire album devoted to classic '80s ballads – covering classics from Queen and Kenny Loggins, and even managing to make Phil Collins listenable.

\$10.00
theprotomen.com

STAR WARS: THE ORIGINAL MARVEL YEARS OMNIBUS VOLUME 1

Marvel Comics was the first publisher to jump on the Star Wars bandwagon, and they introduced fans to a series of new galactic adventures and characters. Now the first 45 Star Wars comics ever printed are being rereleased in this Wookiee-sized Omnibus.

\$125
marvel.com

Nintendo, The Follower

Nintendo is chasing trends instead of setting them. That needs to change



by Matt Helgeson, Senior Features Editor

N

intendo has a long history of innovation. In many ways, it created the modern game industry with the Nintendo Entertainment System in 1985. It was a model successful enough to last nearly three decades, but time does not stand still. The sweeping changes that have occurred in recent years – the explosion of mobile and social gaming, digital distribution, crowdfunding, the indie game movement, and free to play – have conspired to make Nintendo's "toymaker" mentality seem painfully behind the times. In many ways, the core of Nintendo's business isn't much different than it was when it was selling game cartridges; many of its big franchises are still the same.

Right now, Nintendo is enjoying strong sales of its Amiibo figures, which are flying off the store shelves and causing long lines at retailers. I'm sure it will be touted as another triumph by the company. However, it's a hollow victory that shows how a company once known for leading the game industry is now following the crowd.

Nintendo can spin Amiibos any way it likes, but it's clear: the company saw the success of Activision's Skylanders and Disney Infinity and wanted in on the action. Now, instead of being first, it's waiting to see another competitor prove Skylanders wasn't a fad. What's worse is that its Amiibo initiative feels like a half-measure at best. It's just another Nintendo nostalgia cash-in: make some little plastic figure of the same old characters and sell them to your core fans. While Amiibos do serve some purpose in Super Smash Bros., their features are clearly modeled on Skylanders. Their utility in other games like Mario Kart and Hyrule Warriors is even more irrelevant – serving only to unlock items or costumes.

On the one hand, there's nothing wrong with it. If people want to buy small plastic Mario and Zelda statues, that's fine by me. But contrast it to what Activision did with Skylanders. It made a tremendous investment and risk in some brand-new toy-to-game technology, and had Toys for Bob build a brand-new (and very well designed) game from the ground up to showcase it. It was a huge gamble on the packaged goods sector of the games market, a sector that most experts said was in rapid decline. That's Activision – the money-hungry, shovelware purveyors of Call of Duty, not the creative geniuses of childhood magic at Nintendo. But you tell me: who's innovating and who's not?

Nintendo didn't even have the guts or wherewithal to be second to market, allowing Disney to establish a few iterations of Infinity (which at least have a purpose-built games to support them) before it halfheartedly entered the market.

It's something we've seen the company do increasingly in recent years. The DS was a success and kids love their iPhones – Nintendo makes a home console with a touch screen. *Avatar* was huge and all the TV companies are pushing 3D goggles – Nintendo makes a 3D handheld. The result? The Wii U is a tremendous failure and, for most gamers, the 3DS' 3D switch might as well be glued to the "off" position (at least before the "new" 3DS's recent release). It's no coincidence the company's last

true success came with the Wii, which gave the public something they didn't know they wanted. Anticipating where the game industry is headed, not imitating where it's been, is how Nintendo became a legendary company. Now, it needs to recapture that pioneering spirit if it's going to enjoy another 30 years atop the game industry.

Amiibos are a success, because there's a couple generations of Americans who have nearly endless nostalgia for Nintendo. We grew up on those games and franchises, and they resonate in the same way as franchises like Spider-Man, Star Trek, and Star Wars. For a couple decades, playing Nintendo games was a part of growing up. Look around you at the kids playing Minecraft on their iPads and ask yourself: Will that be true in another 20 years? I doubt it.

Certainly, there are kids that play and enjoy Nintendo games today – millions of them. But it's not the same. There are so many options available to kids today, many of them free to play, that it's impossible that Nintendo will mean the same thing to them as it does to me. When I fell in love with the Nintendo Entertainment System, it wasn't the only system, but it was the only one anyone I knew cared about. This gives Nintendo a deep well of nostalgia to draw from, and in the case of Amiibos, cash in on. But it won't last forever; even now the core Mario and Zelda games don't do the huge numbers they once did (though Mario Kart is apparently ageless). Instead of chasing short-term gains based on its past, Nintendo should be concentrating on new technology, new business models, and new franchises that will define it in the future. ♦

The views and opinions expressed in this column are strictly those of the author and not necessarily those of Game Informer

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If you work in the industry and would like to share your opinion, contact senior features editor Matt Helgeson at matt@gameinformer.com



April

01.1 Copenhagen Games 2015

League of Legends, Hearthstone, and Counter-Strike: Go headline this five-day expo focused on eSports tournaments and the talent that competes in them. Huge cash prizes are tied to each tournament.

01.2 Injustice Added To DC Continuity

In *Convergence*, a new weekly series from DC Comics, all of the heroes and villains from Zero Hour, the Crisis events, and Elseworlds are thrown together into one gigantic, universe-spanning battle. Interestingly, the characters of the Injustice video game are now a part of DC's universe.

03.1 Every Actor Ever In One Movie

The Fast and the Furious movies keep cruising along. *Furious 7* opens today, and has more stars than an award show red carpet. The Rock, Paul Walker, Vin Diesel, Kurt Russell, Michelle Rodriguez, Jason Statham, and Dodge Charger are all in it. *Furious 7* is like *The Expendables* except people actually want to see it.

03.2 Different Games 2015

Held at the NYU Magnet Center in Brooklyn, NY, Different Games is an expo that focuses on diversity and inclusiveness in games. This two-day show features speakers, panels, workshops, and an arcade focused on games that showcase diversity.

03.3 WonderCon Anaheim 2015

With a wide focus ranging from games to comic books, WonderCon Anaheim is one of the biggest shows of the spring. WonderCon runs for three days and offers a wide variety of activities, including the first screening of the new *Batman vs. Robin* animated film.

04 Super Replay Showdown Finals

The final battle in Game Informer's annual Super Replay Showdown airs today on gameinformer.com and YouTube. The winner of the tournament picks the next Super Replay. Tune in to Replay episodes every Saturday throughout March to watch the tournament unfold.



07 New Releases

- Dark Souls II: Scholar of the First Sin (PS4, Xbox One, PS3, 360)
- Etrian Mystery Dungeon (3DS)

08 Supermax Monsters

What if the prison drama *Oz* was crossed with *Godzilla*? That's the premise behind *Kaijumas*, Zander Cannon's comic about giant monsters kept under guard on a secluded island. Cannon is the mind behind the Eisner-nominated *Heck*, and he also drew our Game Informer cover on page 55.

10 New Releases

- Dead Synchronicity: Tomorrow Comes Today (PC)
- Xenoblade Chronicles 3D (New 3DS)

14 New Releases

- Mortal Kombat X (PS4, Xbox One, PS3, 360, PC)
- Operation Abyss: New Tokyo Legacy (Vita)

21 Games For Change 2015

The eleventh annual Games for Change festival kicks off today in NYU's

Skirball Center for Performing Arts and concludes on April 25 with a day-long arcade that is open to the public.

24 New Releases

- Kholat (PC)

28 New Releases

- State of Decay: Year One Survival Edition (Xbox One, PC)

30 New Releases

- 3D Fantasy Zone II (3DS)
- Block N Load (PC)
- Wander (PC)
- Westerado: Double Barreled (PC) ♦

2015

BLOOD & GASOLINE



MAD MAX

» **Platform** PlayStation 4 • Xbox One • PC » **Style** 1-Player Action
» **Publisher** Warner Bros. Interactive » **Developer** Avalanche Studios » **Release** September 1

M

Mad Max is a broken man. Over the course of George Miller's film trilogy, tragedy forged Max into a hard, but hollow shell. In many ways, his detachment from the increasing chaos around him made him into the

legendary survivor that audiences know. He's an opportunistic user, and if his actions benefit anyone else it's purely a collateral effect.

"The insides of Max are a wasteland, and he's living in a wasteland," says Odd Ahlgren, the game's director of narrative design. "It's like a mirror image of himself. It's the complete demise of everything that he knew. And now it's turned into this

completely chaotic, super-violent, desperate world – and that's what's going on inside of him as well. It's a constant struggle."

Between Avalanche Studios' open-world game and Miller's upcoming film *Mad Max: Fury Road*, the franchise is undergoing a revival. As we learned during a two-day visit in Avalanche's Stockholm, Sweden, office – which included hours of hands-on time – that doesn't mean that he's going soft. The game provides its own take on the character and the Wasteland. It's respectful to the franchise that fans love, while leaving plenty of room for the Just Cause studio to do what it does best: create open-world mayhem.

THE RELUCTANT HERO RETURNS TO THE WASTELAND IN A KNUCKLE-BRUIISING, AUTO-ANNIHILATING NIGHTMARE

BY JEFF CORK

AN UNLIKELY PAIR

Keeping with tradition, the game opens as Max's life takes a turn for the even worse. He's on foot in the Great White, which initially seems like a vast expanse of blinding nothingness. Someone has taken his beloved Interceptor, the V8-powered, black car he famously drove in *Mad Max* and *The Road Warrior*, and he's been left for dead. Along the way, he's found a companion, an Australian cattle dog like the one seen in the second film.

"Max has some degree of trust with this dog – it has a nose and it has the ability to find things, maybe even find water," says game director Frank Rooke. "He's done Max good, even if they've only known each other for maybe a day at the most."

The dog wanders off, and Max hears its helpless yelps. Following its cries, Max sees that its foot is caught in a bear trap. It's good for the dog that Max came when he did. An odd, hunchbacked man who set the trap is preparing to eat the helpless pup. Considering what we've seen that passes for food in the Mad Max universe, it's understandable why dog meat sounds delicious. Max firmly insists the man should reconsider, and the pair begins talking.

Max learns that the would-be dog eater is named Chumbucket, and he's a blackfinger – a skilled mechanic with an unnatural understanding of engines. Chum takes his fondness of cars to an extreme level, worshipping them with religious fervor. He sees Max not as a pathetic desert wanderer, but as an angel sent by the god Combustion who can help Chum realize his ultimate goal of creating his masterwork, the Magnum Opus. Max sees an opportunity to get what he wants: a car fast enough to get out of this hell and into the Plains of Silence, a place Max thinks can deliver the peace he's after.

Their relationship is essentially transactional, even though Chum becomes a constant presence for Max. "He doesn't want Chumbucket around, he only uses him," Ahlgren says. "He never becomes friends with Chumbucket. Down the line, we meet other characters that he is more or less forced to become emotionally tied to, and of course that doesn't turn out good, because he's like an Ouroboros – one of those snakes that keeps biting its own tail. It's just a never-ending story of not wanting to have any human relation and not daring to, and then having a human relation and then everybody dies and he has to go kill somebody and it just starts over again."

Through the rest of the game's opening, Max manages to piss off some Wastelanders who take offense at Max blowing up their outpost. To be fair, while scouting the place Max had to watch as the road scum dismantled his beloved Interceptor.





ON THE ROAD AGAIN

Max's actions have stirred up trouble among a gang of motorized maniacs. They don't need much provocation to begin with, so his little outpost stunt has unhinged them further. Here, our guided demo begins, which Rooke says begins about 30 percent into the campaign. The gang blows up Chumbucket's rusty ship-turned-garage, and Max gets a nice look at Stankgum as they barely escape the destruction. He's a knife-licking weirdo who's a major player in the hierarchy that rules this world. Chum says to follow a few stragglers, and Max does. The pair drives off in a long U shape, which gives players a chance to see the scope of the devastation. The rotted hull of the garage is dotted with flowering explosions punctuated with dull thuds.

Chum clings onto the car's roll cage in back, leaning during moments of acceleration, rocking as the car bumps over rough patches, and ecstatically pounding on the roof during moments of big air. He's a handy companion to the player, even if Max isn't particularly fond

of his presence. Max isn't much of a talker, and Chum serves as a way for Avalanche to get more dialogue in the game. He's also the closest thing Max has to a GPS, calling out points of interest such as cars approaching from behind, distant camps that can be scavenged, and landmarks – all in his Igor-like voice.

Without a garage, Chumbucket's plans are on indefinite hold – unless, of course, he can forge an uneasy peace with the leader of a nearby stronghold. “The only thing that you can trade with someone – there's no monetary system at all – is with your skills,” Ahlgren says. “Chumbucket has survived because of his godlike skills with engines. Everything in this world is driven by engines, so people will need him every now and then, so they don't kill him. He has built a little bit of a reputation for himself, even though he's a bit of a bizarre hermit at the beginning of this game, people know of him and he's done a little bit of work for everyone in the past.”

The closest stronghold can be seen in the distance – the fortified remains of a lighthouse.

Chumbucket is helpful at calling out the occasional location in the distance, but his misaligned eyes can only see so much. Pulling up the map provides few clues; just a large landmass with what appears to be a few key locations sketched on them. Max will have to do this manually. He approaches a small hot-air balloon, which Avalanche calls a vantage outpost, hops into the basket, and yanks on a cord to ascend. From there, players can swap to his binoculars to scout points of interest. Hovering over white dots superimposed on the landscape reveals what they are and puts them on the map, similar to State of Decay's tower system. In addition to spying stationary items like totemic scarecrows and scavenging locations, we see patrol cars roaming far in the distance, blurred by the shimmering heat from the unrelenting sun.

Before climbing back in his car, Max pauses to scour the area for resources. He finds a bit of scrap, as well as a jerry can filled with gas – both of which are valuable items to have in the Wasteland. Max's car is adequately fueled,



Enemy boarders will jump onto your car. You can either shake them off or fire a shotgun blast through your roof

so he puts the gas in the back cage for safe keeping. It can be used later to top off his tank or as an improvised explosive.

Driving closer to the lighthouse, we see one of the scarecrows. These have been placed throughout the Wasteland's various regions as a way of terrorizing the locals and showing the power of Gasland's ruler, Scrotus Scabrous. Removing these structures helps diminish his influence, and that's exactly what Max does. With the press of a button, time slows and players can aim Chum's harpoon at a target. The effect is generous, giving players plenty of time to dial in their shots. Once it's ready, another button press fires off the projectile and time returns to normal. Max's car remains in motion, and it's a smooth transition as the harpoon hits its target and pulls it down. A cooldown period begins as Chumbucket reels his weapon back in, but they've moved past the target by then. Looking back, we see a few icons that indicate scrap pickups, but we're trying to keep a schedule. We have warlords to meet, after all.



GEORGE MILLER'S INVOLVEMENT

Mad Max isn't affiliated with the upcoming *Mad Max: Fury Road*, but series creator George Miller worked with Avalanche to ensure that it was as authentic to the franchise as possible. They definitely had leeway with their version of Max himself, though they're working within Miller's parameters. For instance, take solace that Aussie actor Bren Foster has taken the role of Max in the game.

"George Miller was very involved in the game," says Peter Wyse, senior vice president of production and development at Warner Bros. Interactive. "The Wasteland is based on the rules that George Miller laid out for us over the course of lots of time working together. Also, the characters from the main story were created by George and the crew at KMM [the production company Kennedy Miller Mitchell]. This included Corey [Barlog], who was very involved in the creation of the story and working with Avalanche early on to get them steeped in the ways of the Wasteland.

"At a certain point in development, with our story and main characters solidified, and the rules of the Wasteland baked into our DNA, we wanted to let Avalanche really focus on bringing the open world to life in all the crazy, emergent ways that Avalanche does that. This was the same time that George was filming the movie. From that point, George did not stay involved with us day-to-day, but we keep him and KMM aware of what's going on with the game."

Miller kept the source of humanity's downfall fairly vague in the original films, referencing in *The Road Warrior* two warring tribes and hints at a nuclear war. Avalanche took a subtly different approach in creating its timeline and version of the apocalypse.

PREPARING FOR BATTLE

We continue our trek toward the stronghold, and eventually we reach it. It doesn't appear that its inhabitants are particularly excited to see us. They draw crossbows (firearms remain scarce), and Chumbucket makes his case for them lowering the drawbridge and giving us access. The leader, Jeet, doesn't seem interested in Chum's credentials; he's more keen on learning if Max has any medical training. After a few tense moments, we roll into the base.

To call it a stronghold is a bit of an exaggeration. It's barely populated, and many of the people within its crumbling walls are sick. Meeting Jeet, it's clear why he's so desperate for someone with medical training.

"Jeet and his tribe are very tweaked out," Ahlgren says. "We don't say it straight out that they're tweakers, but they have this very tweaky mentality. He suffers from these extreme head pains, and he has learned that he can control them by causing himself pain in other parts of his body." He gets intense headaches, but he eases the pain by twisting shards of metal embedded in his body.

After learning that Max is heading to the Silent Plains, Jeet tosses a wet blanket on the plan. Max needs to go through Gasland, and you don't simply stroll into Gasland. Max first must do some recon, and Chum says he can build a sniper rifle to help. The

trigger mechanism and a few chunks of scrap are fortunately within a quick run through the lighthouse. Chum builds the gun – which he calls the longshot – with typical enthusiasm. Like the harpoon, the longshot is part of the car; Max doesn't crawl on his belly and dial in shots. As fans know, he's most comfortable when he's at the wheel or close to his vehicle.

Max fires off a few shots at some nearby barrels to dial in the weapon, and then they're off. Players can enter the sniper mode by selecting the weapon using the d-pad and then pressing a button. Chum doesn't use this one; instead, Max swaps places with Chum and fires from the back of the vehicle.



We head to Dead Barren's Pass, which is the center of Scrotus' power, as well as what passes for civilization in this place. You can't miss this massive oil refinery off to the north. Its constantly smoking stacks are a dead giveaway during the day, and at night its fires provide a beacon. The refinery converts crude oil to gas, providing a steady source of fuel to Scrotus' faction, the War Boys. "We want resources to be scarce but we also want a car game, we want to drive a lot and so on," says senior game designer Emil Kraftling. "So gas can't be super scarce, because otherwise it would be a walking game instead of a driving game."

Like many in the Wasteland, the War Boys have little to lose. "Most of the War Boys are suffering already from different types of cancer, and they're more or less dying," Ahlgren says. "They're between 15 and 20 years old. They know that they're not going to make it to 30 – and it's not just violence that's going to take them."

Sticking to the road, Chum points out that the barely defined stretch of asphalt is a trade route for Scrotus' oil convoys. The path is then highlighted with a red-and-white striped pattern on the minimap to denote its importance. Max will want to return to these places later. For now, he moves away from Gasland and creeps toward an enemy outpost.

Max pulls out his longshot and pulls off a clean shot on a sniper. Moments after firing the weapon, he's rear-ended by a truck. He slides back into the driver's seat, and races forward. Chum latches a harpoon into the bumper of one fleeing vehicle, and Max hits the nitro to perform a special smashing



maneuver. He closes the distance almost instantly and drives through the wreckage in a crash that would have been right at home in the first movie. A raider jumps from a car onto the Magnum Opus' roof, spear in hand. Before he can plunge his weapon into the windshield, Max shakes from side to side, knocking the interloper off. A shotgun blast to the fuel tank of the third vehicle removes it from the equation in an impressive blast.

Even though he came out victorious, Max's car is in dire shape. Flames are licking

the side of the supercharger, and its body looks battered. Coming to a stop, Max tells Chumbucket to fix it. He scampers onto the hood, fire extinguisher in hand. After knocking the flames down, he slowly refills the car's health meter by banging on various parts, using a socket wrench, and perhaps even performing a little blackfinger magic. As the story progresses, Chum will become better at his job. Acquiring goggles, a headlamp, and additional tools make him an even more efficient mechanic.

THE WASTELAND

Avalanche wouldn't say how big the in-game Wasteland is compared to the studios' other games like *Just Cause 2*. During my hands-on time, going from stronghold to stronghold took a considerable amount of time – it wasn't like a quick trip to the supermarket.

Game director Frank Rooke also pointed out that the borders of the map are soft. You're free to head beyond the defined territories into an area called the Big Nothing. The name is a bit misleading, because it's filled with massive sandstorms that fling debris and occasionally some rare auto parts toward Max and his car. You can try dodging it, but ultimately there's no food or water to sustain you. Rooke says there are special items you can harpoon, but it's extremely dangerous to try.

My colleague Tim Turi decided to brave the zone; and he lasted about eight seconds before he was fatally struck by lightning.





DOGS OF WAR

The car battle has attracted more War Boys, and Max wisely chooses to retreat. Max is mad, but he's not suicidal. He's not getting away clean, however. Another truck approaches, filled with four boarders. Max gets out of the car and prepares for hand-to-hand combat. Meanwhile, Chum happily continues his work. The combat is based on rhythmic button presses, countering attacks, and rolling away from smashing attacks. It's similar to what you might see in Rocksteady's Arkham series, if Batman wasn't averse to stabbing faces. Max punches, kicks, and uses his shiv until the enemy taunts and vehicle noises go silent, replaced by the ratcheting of Chum's wrench.

Chum has one more trick in his arsenal: The Thunderpoon. The weapon is as powerful as it is silly to pronounce. "The Thunderpoon is an

offshoot of the harpoon," Rooke says. "You've attached an explosive cap to the harpoon spear. That's the ammo that you're collecting when you fire it. You put this thing on it and use it like a rocket launcher."

Getting close to the outpost, Max yanks the front gate open with the harpoon and roars inside. His mission is to destroy two oil pumps. A war crier hangs from a sling above the camp – reminiscent of the mechanic from *The Road Warrior*. If he isn't eliminated early in the battle, he provides a rallying bonus to fighters. There are plenty of them already, they don't need any help. Even though Max only has four shotgun shells at this point, it's worth the ammo.

After clearing a few open areas, Max finds a fuel can, lights it, and places it near a door. The improvised explosive blows it open and

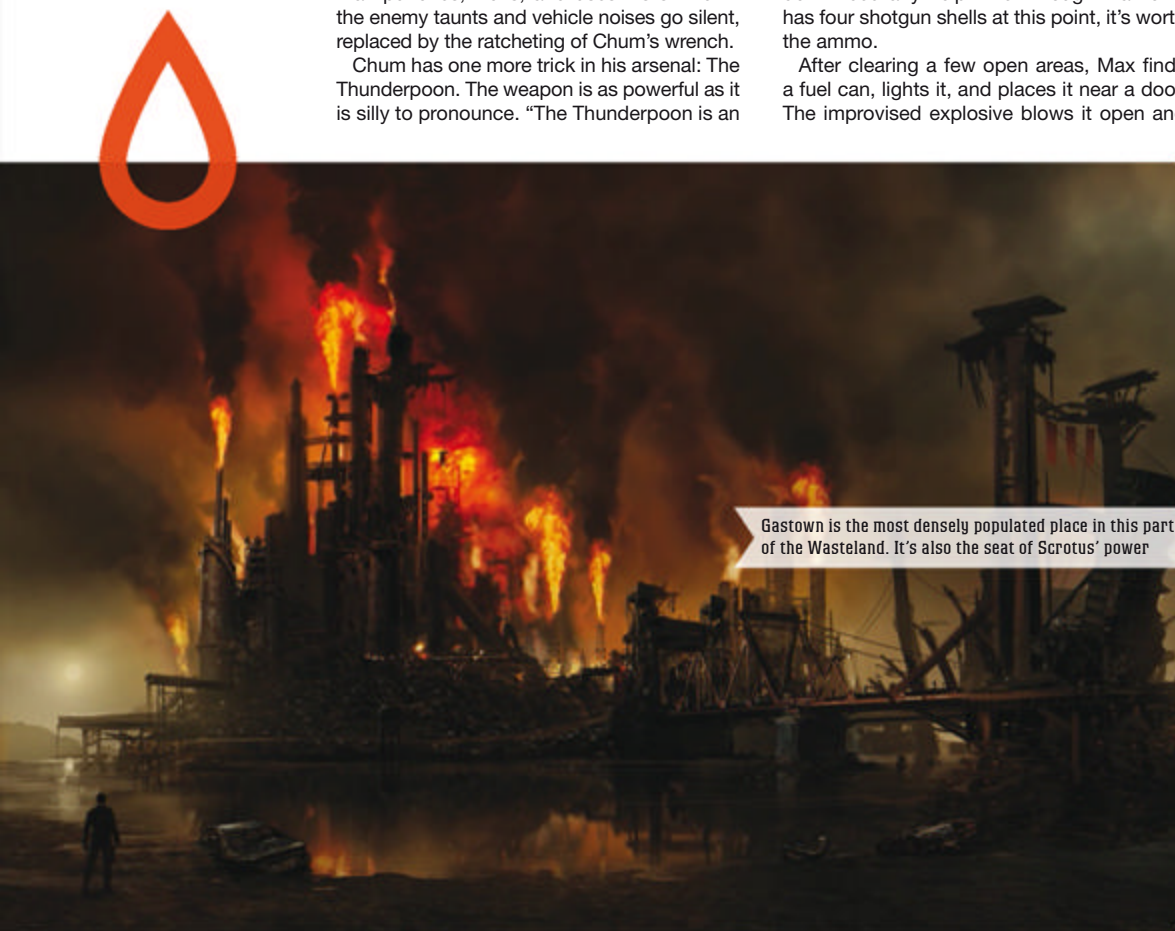
he continues. He does the same to the oil pumps, which fill the area with gorgeous explosions that temporarily highlight the immediate vicinity. Max returns to the Magnum Opus and heads back out. Scrotus' influence is reduced, and wastelanders can move into this area as a place of refuge.

Max pauses to eat some Dinki-Di dog food and fill his canteen from a spigot. Food instantly refills his health bar, while the water in a canteen is a portable way to replenish it. "Also, if you look around you'll see birds circling around," Rooke says. "That cues the player that there's a body that's decomposing. Maggots are a primary source of protein in this world. It's kind of gross, but it's something for the player to use as food. There are also rodents and things for the player to eat."

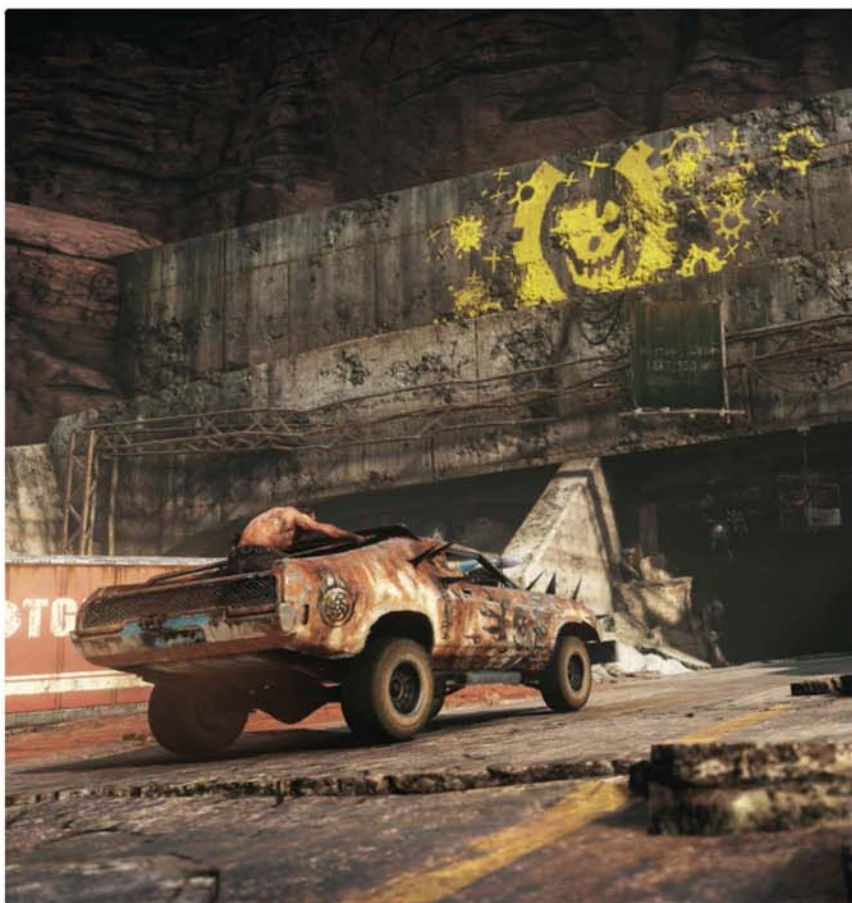
A War Boy grabs Max from behind, but Max breaks free and in one fluid gesture stabs him in the top of his skull. This isn't the Max we've seen in the movies, which is what Avalanche is aiming for. "We're not hung onto this past that we've seen in the movies," Rooke says. "We're kind of redefining exactly what Mad Max is, though at the core, the heart of Max and George Miller's vision is definitely there. But we've reset a bit. The Max that we're dealing with is very flawed, but he's also had a lot of military training. He's a trained warrior, a trained fighter, and a trained survivor."

We now skip ahead in the campaign to the point where Max heads to Gastown. He's forced to dodge blasts of fire as defenders try to take his vehicle out. He'll need it if he hopes to complete his next task: winning the race that will finally give him the Big Chief V8. Max talks to a guy covered in Christmas lights, trailed by a lackey carrying a generator. The man calls Max "Lighty boy," in reference to the lights that Max tracked down for him. Rooke says at this point in the game, about 50 percent in, Max has worked with this flamboyantly lit announcer to earn the right to participate in the race.

The stakes are significant: Stankgum is the beloved race champion. Before he has time to react, Max is handcuffed to the Magnum Opus, as some of Gastown's finest slam an explosive device with an oven-timer mechanism into Chum's usual spot. Would we expect anything less? Even something as simple as a race has dramatic consequences in the Wasteland.



Gastown is the most densely populated place in this part of the Wasteland. It's also the seat of Scrotus' power



MY TURN AT THE WHEEL

Frank Rooke is a great road companion, but I am thirsty to do some exploration on my own. For several unguided hours, it is just me against this inhospitable world. It reminds me of the moment where Max was strapped to a spooked horse in *Beyond Thunderdome*, only I'm not in any danger of dying from exposure or running into a bunch of boring kids.

Once I get a sense of the controls, I immediately do what any sane person would do behind the wheel of a car in a vast wasteland: doughnuts. I slam the wheel to the right and press hard on the gas (or trigger button). Sure enough, the car whips around in a tight circle, leaving an impressive cloud of dust and carving out a circular rut in the sand. After that, I let the Magnum Opus go forward and slam on the nitrous. I recently rewatched *The Road Warrior* for the umpteenth time, and the boost's signature whine is dead on. The car's back end waggles a bit until the tires have enough traction to ride arrow straight. It isn't annoying; it is just one more thing that sells the impression that I am in control of a savage road beast.

The Great White isn't a boring salt flat, which makes my first driving session memorable. The terrain is littered with sand and pebbles, and there are plenty of berms to launch off. It's only a matter of time before an enemy takes notice of my idiocy. In this case, it's a Roadkill driver at the wheel of a VW Bug clone. I chase after it, edging closer and closer. Suddenly, it slams on the brakes and does a beautiful 180-degree turn. I would

applaud him, but I am too busy falling off the previously unseen edge of a cliff like a post-apocalyptic Wile E. Coyote.

Fortunately, the penalty for dying is minimal. I restart at the nearest outpost, which isn't far from my freefall. Rooke says that the save system is quite generous. Even if you die immediately after picking up a chunk of scrap or other collectable object, you won't lose that item. You may have to drive a bit to get exactly where you were, but I am having such a great time tooling around like a maniac that I don't see that as too troublesome. Those vantage outposts serve as fast-travel points in the world in the event that you want to speed things up a bit.

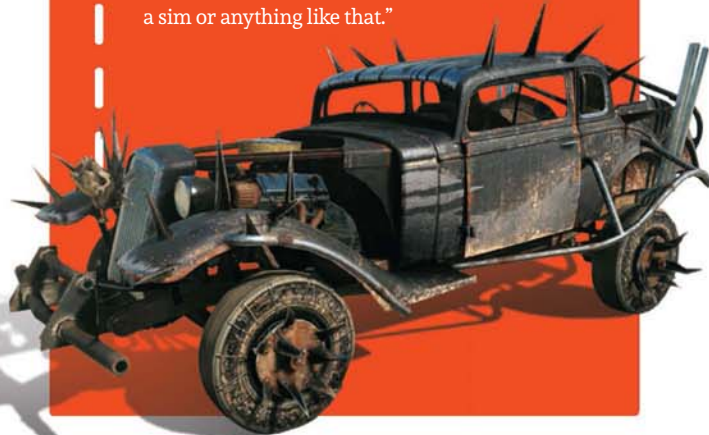
As it turns out, I'm not far from one. Even though Gasland is within sight, fuel is just scarce enough to make it important. Hopping into the balloon's basket, I see that it has its own gas gauge. Scanning the horizon, the smears and distortion effects on Max's binocular lenses is a nice reminder that wiping things down with a rag is as close to clean as this world gets. Even though scouting from a vantage point is similar across the Wasteland, many of them have a twist to keep it interesting. This balloon is completely out of fuel, so I have to track down a jerry can to fill up its tank. Another seems normal until I try going skyward; it is tethered down by a series of cables. A few strategically placed shots from the Magnum Opus' harpoon solves that problem. The same philosophy of mixing it up extends to strongholds, enemy camps, and other challenges.

YOUR OWN MAGNUM OPUS

During my hands-on time with the game, I was given access to a fairly comprehensive suite of vehicle options. Everything was stock when I started (except for the high-level harpoon), but I wanted to explore what the Magnum Opus was capable of. You can access the garage at any point by popping into a menu, and start tinkering. Game director Frank Rooke says they originally wanted players to visit garages and strongholds to do so, but gameplay ultimately prevailed.

The car is filled with customization possibilities, including different types of tires, engines, armor, ramming grills, defensive spikes, exhaust systems, and more, each with its own upgrade path. I use the scrap that I've been collecting to upgrade the engine. That's the obvious choice after all, right? The car does indeed go faster, but the rest of the car can't quite keep up. It is a squirrely ride, which could be an instant death sentence in combat. I go back in, this time paying closer attention to the stat bars to the side of the screen, that provide an at-a-glance idea of your top speed, acceleration, armor, traction, and other valuable information. Yes, the engine is faster, but it comes at the cost of handling. From that point on, I realize that higher-level upgrades aren't an automatic path to success. Rooke says that's by design.

"We didn't want it to be this sort of, 'This equates to this exactly,'" he says. "Because you start to lose that tinkering aspect, the thing of kind of dialing it in. For players who are not or don't want to be super in tune with that aspect of the car, don't think that it's going to be the end of the world. You've got goals, like, 'I want to do more damage, and then I put a bigger grill on my car.' 'I want my car to go faster, so I'm going to put a bigger engine in.' There are those high-level things that they can grasp. If you want to get deeper into the feel of the car and really feel like it's your own car and how it handles and that sort of stuff, you can start tinkering with the balance [of parts]. But in fun ways; we're not trying to be a sim or anything like that."



ME AND MY HARPOON

I head to a scavenging outpost, which is one of the nine points that my trip to the vantage outpost uncovered. Players who investigate these spots have a good shot at finding ammo, food, and other less common items. This one is filled with enemies – including one who calls me “Raggedy man.” I didn’t like that nickname when Auntie gave it to Max in *Beyond Thunderdome*, and I definitely don’t like it now. Infuriated, I impale the goon with a harpoon and drag his limp body behind as I run over his remaining friends.

The longshot looked pretty cool during the hands-off demo, but I don’t use it much. Instead, I find myself relying – some might say over relying – on the harpoon. When upgraded it allows players to do a variety of devious things, such as yanking off enemy tires (effectively taking the crippled car out of play),


pulling people from the driver’s seat, or simply impaling anyone on foot. One of the highlights comes when I am pulling a guy behind me and step on the brakes. He is propelled forward, and smacks into a spike-covered War Boy car. He sticks. Later, I latch onto a car’s tire and his buddy drives between me and the car. The second driver plows into the cable, yanking the other car’s tire free. Thanks, I guess. Chumbucket is a great asset during battle, as he calls out enemy weaknesses and warns of unseen attackers.

This contrast of crazed drivers versus mankind’s inherent vulnerability is something that fascinates Rooke. “There’s the rusty metal of the car, and then there’s this fleshy person inside,” he says.” Those are the two elements of these battles. We wanted that feeling of these two things playing together that do not belong together when things are smashing

and crashing into each other.”

Harpooning bloodthirsty maniacs is its own reward, but there’s an added perk: Players can drive any enemy car that they come across, provided it hasn’t yet exploded. Chum won’t come with you (the Magnum Opus is like his child, and you can’t leave those unattended), and you don’t have access to the harpoon or longshot, but it’s a good way to appreciate how good you have it. I hop into an unassuming sedan, and decide to go for a drive.

Sure, the engine sounds like a flute, and it drives like crap, but it steers and moves. I spy a mysterious figure far off in the distance. Getting closer, I can see that it is a statue of a robed figure, with outstretched arms and no head. I circle around it to get a better look, and inadvertently stir up a hornet’s nest – an entrenched, flamethrowing, sniper-protected hornet’s nest. Turning tail, someone targets my



It might be helpful if Chum could leap from the Magnum Opus onto other cars, but he sticks close to his masterwork

tire and I find myself trying to escape on three wheels and a rim. That kind of embarrassment doesn't happen in the Magnum Opus.

"It's great seeing a tire pop on an enemy vehicle when you're causing it, or a sniper could potentially miss your car and hit their car, so it's cool seeing their tire pop for no reason," Rooke says. "But having [the Magnum Opus] start breaking down and limping along in the middle of a fight, where a bunch of other cars are ramming into you is just not equating to fun. Your car takes damage, but more in a natural way."

Limping away, I see exactly where he's coming from. I hop out of the wreck-to-be, fire my flare into the air, and Chum delivers the Magnum Opus right to me. I pause long enough to smash into the sedan a few times before heading on to some more structured action. It's time to meet Gutgash.



THE BENEFITS OF SCRAPPING LAST-GEN

Mad Max was originally announced for current- and last-gen systems. During its production, however, Avalanche made the decision to leave the Xbox 360 and PlayStation 3 versions by the wayside. That choice has given the team freedom to expand upon ideas that were originally in place.

Design director Magnus Nedfors says that current consoles offer more than just nicer-looking visuals. Gameplay and environmental effects are closely linked in Mad Max, as players quickly discover. Enemy convoys can be seen from far away by the massive dust clouds they generate on what remains of the roads – a much better option than merely placing an icon on the minimap.

"The level of fidelity we've been able to achieve not just with the cinematics – which I'm really proud of – the whole world is singing visually," says lead lighting artist Carl Ross. "It feels like we're not just going for that higher-res sort of thing, but the way we're thinking about it is the way that everything's connected in the world, and that's kind of a [current-gen] way of thinking as well. Not just making everything look higher-res, but how is everything linked together in the world."

Game director Frank Rooke offers a practical example: "You're traveling out in your vehicle and the dust travels off that way, and you see the flag's also doing that and then the lantern is also doing that. You may not consciously say, 'Oh, cool, everything is working in unison,' but I think it helps you feel that everything is connected and it is working as you would expect it to work, and there's a nice feeling to it."

The draw distance is impressive, but that's not the least of it. According to Ross and studio sound director Magnus Lindberg, the game loads sounds and light sources from two virtual kilometers away from the player. Closer to Max, I appreciated how long the footprints stick around. As someone who is directionally challenged, I used them often to backtrack my way out of outposts and other large, complex structures.



STRONGHOLD MAN

Gutgash, like Jeet, is in command of one of the Wasteland's strongholds. Apparently, he has a better sense of what's going on than his tweaked-out counterpart. "He's an older guy, so he's probably been around since the world fell," Odd Ahlgren says. "Most of the people in his camp are younger. He's realized that in order to give people hope, they have to cling to something. He's started to tell them that the water will someday come back. It first withdrew in disgust from the world, and one day when we're worthy it will come back."

Sure enough, Gutgash and his small group of followers are living in the broken remains of a ship. Gutgash is a bald man with a crutch and a massive beard. He's gruff at first, but it's clear that he's doing his best to keep his friends/followers alive as long as possible. It's going to be tough, considering the state of his stronghold.

It's largely barren, but there are ghostly indicators that hint at its potential. Possible upgrades are available, including water storage for unlimited canteen refills, a scrap crew to generate scrap even when the game is off, an armory for refilling ammo, and a survey crew

to mark scavenging locations in the territory on Max's map.

Something else stands out as being particularly disgusting, even in this hellhole. "The thing about maggots – and this is just getting underneath the hood of our world – there are maggot farms, and they actually have people lose a limb and then they farm the maggots," Rooke says. "That's just a way that they grow the food. If you notice, there's no green, so there's no vegetation. There's absolutely no vegetation, and very little life. Food is extremely scarce. Water is scarce, too. So we've created means of generating food." It's probably better not to ask whether the limbs are donated.

Talking to Gutgash, I learn that the day of reckoning is coming soon, and they need to be prepared. He's convinced his followers that being prepared means armoring up the ship to make it seaworthy. Privately, Gutgash says the armor is to protect his stronghold from an inevitable War Boy attack. He wants Max to find a source of armor, and not just anything will do. He puts a mark on the map where he says Max can find pristine sheets of steel.

On my way out, I take a wrong turn on the exit and see a woman and child in a cage. At first I think it's some kind of cannibalistic scheme, but then the kid starts coughing and moaning. I know that working with Gutgash will not only pay off for me, but it will improve the overall quality of life for everyone who lives here. Max doesn't care.

I head to the position, which is a series of tunnels northeast of Gutgash's ship. During the drive, I gain a better appreciation for how much visual variety the artists have put into the game. Based on the initial trailer and assumptions about the franchise, I expected to tool around in a vast, featureless desert. There's much more going on in the Wasteland.



This Magnum Opus build shows another cosmetic take, as well as some fearsome-looking fire effects

SURPRISING VARIETY

Senior producer John Fuller says the game's concept artist took inspiration from an unlikely source: fantasy art. "He was very keen to get striking colors and breathtaking vistas with dramatic sunsets and skylines and that sort of stuff – dramatic and eye-catching silhouettes for rock formations and cliffs and mantles," Fuller says. "He has been inspired by fantasy, which wouldn't necessarily be an automatic source for a Mad Max title, but it was important for us to create a rich, immersive Wasteland that captures your eye all the time."

The dried-up seabed I'm exploring gave the team a chance to surprise players. In one region, for example, the terrain is filled with weird stone structures that burp sulfurous gas. "We've seen all of those interesting locations from underwater volcanic activities – that's a thing that exists in our world," Nedfors says. "If you took away the water, how would that look? That's kind of the thought behind that area. It creates a possibility for us to do something different visually that still is a wasteland."

Regardless of the visual variety, the Wasteland is a grim place to live. Though the

terrain changed as I crossed into new territory, there were always roving packs of road ragers to contend with. If you upgrade your car's speed, you can outrun them and avoid conflict. That seems like a tactic that misses the entire point, and I go out of my way to leave a wake of smoking metal behind.

I drive the Magnum Opus to the tunnels, which are set into the walls of sea caves with strange coral formations. Exploring the area, I learn they're the remains of a subway tunnel system. I have to carefully navigate the narrow passageways to avoid explosive traps and obstacles. Ultimately I push a subway car through. It's not just a car – it's built out of the shiny steel that Gutgash wants. We're not alone, as Chumbucket delicately puts it: "Oh no, the crazies are here!" Those crazies are Buzzards, a menacing group of fighters wearing the closest I've seen to uniforms – down to their matching gas masks. They aren't especially great fighters, and I take them down without too much effort.

During my hands-on time, the majority of my adventuring took place behind the wheel. Moments like taking out strongholds required

me to hop out and deal with problems on foot, but Max is synonymous with cars. It's only appropriate that I spent a lot of time driving.

Finally we see actual light at the end of the tunnel, and Max gives the subway car one final push. It plunges down the broken bridge, collapsing on the ground below. I follow, and after a rough landing, get out of the car. Max marks the site with a flare gun, so Gutgash's buddies know where to scavenge.

The remainder of Gutgash's mission chain involves finding a sign to keep his followers inspired (it is, quite literally, a metal sign) and finally keeping a group of War Boys from laying siege to the newly reinforced ship. Max doesn't really care about keeping those people safe, though. Helping them will get the wheels turning on a moneymaking machine, which will churn out a reliable source of scrap and other resources – which will help Max earn that Big Chief V8 and, with any luck, a way out of the Wasteland. ♦

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T MULTIPLAYER?

Car-combat games have a long tradition of multiplayer, but Avalanche isn't going down that route. The studio is focused on creating a solid single-player experience. That said, you're not in total isolation. "We don't have multiplayer, but we do have Opus Wars," says game director Frank Rooke. "There's a great way for players to show off their vehicle, their Magnum Opus, relative to a friend's vehicle. We want to make sure that whatever car you make, it's something that you can brag about, because there are so many different ways for you to create your car." Rooke didn't provide specifics, but he says Opus Wars is built into the game – so it sounds a bit more ambitious than comparing rides on a website.

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DARTH CLARK
EDITOR-IN-CHIEF

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We Are So Close

I have always been a forward thinker. When everyone else was mindlessly gobbling up the whole “games as art/entertainment” idea, I alone believed that gaming was never about the games. It has always been about us, the gamers. Now, years later, it seems like you sheep are finally taking my advice and putting yourselves at the center of the video game universe.

Here’s the secret: The games do not matter. The important thing is cultivating an appropriately contentious community surrounding those games. If we’re all holding hands and singing around the gaming campfire, nothing will ever improve.

Does your friend play a game you don’t enjoy? Does a gaming journalist believe something you don’t? Does an indie developer make a game with any kind of message? It is your duty to humiliate and marginalize them in any way possible and isolate them from this hobby. Through continued vigilance, we will one day be safe from these dangerous threats to our way of thinking.

We are so close to reaching this ideal, but in my objective opinion, we still have work to do. Too many people are playing games today who were not playing them 20 years ago. Whether they were just not interested or not born yet, that kind of fair-weather fandom needs to be eliminated. Remember: The only person who should meet the criteria for your definition of “gamer” is yourself.

I’m glad so many people are agreeing with me these days. I am not mean or irrational; I just have incredibly high standards for the gaming community. After all, it is not for everyone. It is for me. And maybe you, if you’re lucky.

Cheers,

Darth Clark

interview



Troy Baker

After voicing every cool video game character you can think of in the last several years, **Troy Baker** has finally solved the puzzle of how to appear in every game ever. The TROY-1000 provides Baker’s golden voice to whoever needs it, for any purpose.

Why did you invent the TROY-1000?

Well, I’ve appeared in over 120 games in my career. For a long time, I had to scrape for every job, but after portraying Booker DeWitt in BioShock Infinite and Joel in The Last of Us, people can’t get enough of me. I soon realized I can’t be in two recording studios at the same time. I had to turn down a contract to play every Assassin’s Creed protagonist for the next 10 years. That series will always be good, so that really stung. But with the TROY-1000, I never have to say no again.

So how does it work?

I basically grabbed a dictionary from the

library and spent a few weeks in a studio reciting every word. With the device, developers can just plug in the script and they’ll get a totally natural, perfect Troy Baker® performance. All that’s left to do is let the Game Awards and BAFTAs roll in.

Why hasn’t every voice actor done this?

No one works as often or as hard as I do, so it hasn’t really been an issue. Well, maybe Nolan North; he was popping up everywhere back when I was still slumming it with lame anime work. However, the next update to the TROY-1000 software comes with my killer Nolan North impersonation, so even he will be rendered obsolete.

gear



1 Rock Band Dusting Spray

The last time you used your Rock Band instruments, people were exercising with shake weights and discovering new ways to be allergic to food. As a result, your plastic instruments are now covered in layers of dust or inhabited by families of small birds. Harmonix’s Rock Band Dusting Spray is uniquely formulated to blast the dust and birds off your instruments and get them back in working order. Time to rock out again, right? Right!?

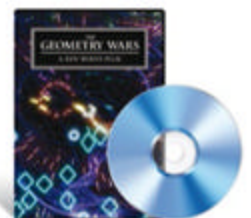
\$5 | rockband.com/anotheronebitesit



2 Halo 5: Guardians Controller Adapter

Inspired by the success of Nintendo’s GameCube controller adapter for Smash Bros., Microsoft is giving fans an opportunity to relive the glory days of Halo. This adapter for Xbox One allows players to use the infamous “Duke” controller with the upcoming Halo 5: Guardians. With any luck, human evolution over the last 10 years has made our hands enormous enough to hold the controller comfortably.

\$99 | microsoft.com/designedbycommittee



KEN BURNS’ THE GEOMETRY WARS

No one knows who fired the first shot in the Geometry Wars, but its echo has reverberated through time. This epic conflict turned simple triangles and pinwheels into criminals, and rocked the foundation of our tiny rectangular universe. This 126-disc DVD set features thousands of hours of professional interviews with math professors and abstract artists set to violin music and slow-panning pictures depicting the brutal massacre of simple shapes and other light patterns.

\$20
geometrywars.com/neverforget

Media Shelf



NINTENDO ANNOUNCES *3DS DIY XL*

Following the success of its New 3DS XL, Nintendo has revealed the latest incarnation of the popular handheld. "The 3DS DIY XL will offer players access to our vast library of games, while teaching players about the ins and outs of electronics," said president and CEO of Nintendo of

America, Reggie Fils-Aime. "It will also save Nintendo a lot of money."

Nintendo says the New 3DS XL, which didn't include an AC adapter in the box, was a test to see how much consumers were willing to tolerate. The 3DS DIY XL takes that strategy further: Retailers will sell the unit packaged

as a single envelope full of various circuits, analog sticks, and screens. Consumers dump out the contents on a mat and solder them together, saving Nintendo time and hassle. The finished unit has no exclusive games or features.

The AC adapter is still sold separately.

DataFile



Sony's Latest "Success"

Virtual Reality is hot these days, and Project Morpheus is Sony's foray into the field. Despite its imminent defeat by the Oculus Rift, Sony remains optimistic about the device. Unlike its one-off disasters like EyeToy and Move, Sony promises years of futile support for Project Morpheus. "It's the Sony way," says CEO Andrew House. "Consumers know that we continue supporting our failures – from the PSP to PlayStation Home to Vita. They know they can count on us to dump money into something long after all interest and enthusiasm have faded."

Watch Dogs Still Released

Remember Watch Dogs? It was Ubisoft's mediocre open-world game last year – the one that wasn't set in France. We recently asked what happened to this game after it quickly vanished from the spotlight. "Mediocre open-world game? You mean Unity?" says an Ubisoft rep. "Oh, Watch Dogs! I'm pretty sure it's still available. We were going to do some DLC or something, but like everyone else, I guess we kinda forgot about it."

New Avengers 2 Trailer!

The newest entry in Marvel's juggernaut superhero franchise recently got a new trailer! Please keep reading our video game magazine and website for all the latest movie news. You might see some *Game of Thrones* stuff, too!

Microsoft Buys Notch's Hat

According to a recent investor report, Microsoft recently purchased a fedora that was worn by Marcus "Notch" Persson for \$2 billion. Analysts were baffled by the purchase, but Phil Spencer, head of Xbox and Microsoft Studios, assured them that it was a "super smart decision."

According to an anonymous employee, Spencer assembled the whole Xbox division in a courtyard for something he called "Operation Frosty." Once outside, employees saw a blanket of snow covering the Microsoft Campus. "Phil directed everyone's attention to a snowman that he'd assembled," the source told us. "It had coal eyes, a carrot nose, and a big beard made out of what looked like alfalfa sprouts."

The source says Spencer then theatrically placed the hat on Notch's snowy doppelganger and waited. "This hat's going to pay off once this snowman comes to life and gives us some of Notch's new ideas," Spencer allegedly said. After a few awkward minutes, everyone went back inside.

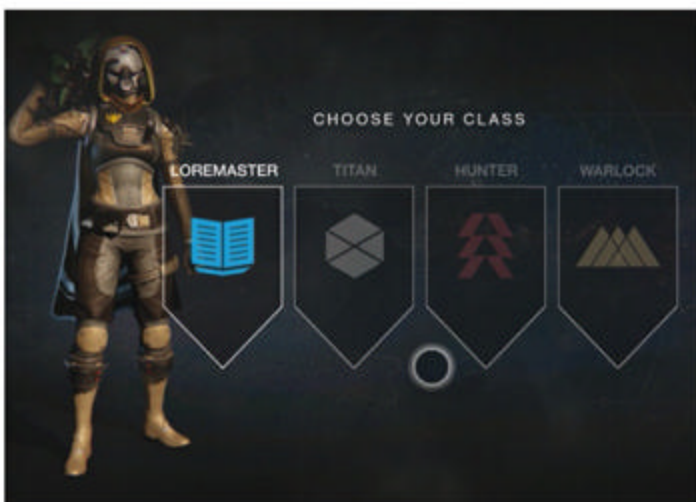
Spencer was overheard telling someone on the phone that the snowman whispered "Scrolls 2," but added that it may have just been the wind.

Meanwhile, Mojang is hard at work making new Minecraft skins or whatever.



Destiny 2

We totally remembered a story this time!



- » **Platform**
PlayStation 4
Xbox One
PlayStation 3
Xbox 360
Still Not PC
- » **Style**
Online Multiplayer
Grinding
- » **Publisher**
Activision
- » **Developer**
Bungie
- » **Release**
Moon Wizard Day

After several expansions that showed off new hallways behind previously locked doors in the maps we've run around in for hundreds of hours, Bungie is finally ready for a true sequel.

One of the chief complaints about the first game was its extremely thin story. That all changes now. In addition to the traditional titan, hunter, and warlock classes, Destiny 2 will have a new loremaster class. "The loremaster doesn't actually have any attacks," says Bungie's David Dague (aka DeeJ). "Whenever you pull the trigger, he or she will recite the history of whatever planet you're on at the time or describe in real-time what the other characters in the fireteam are doing."

To ensure no one misses the narrative, players will have to be in earshot of the loremaster to earn "listening" shards and energy. Rather than collecting raid gear and materials to max your character, this will be the only way to upgrade the top-tier Ear Trumpet armor set with sufficient light to reach level 40. » **Darth Clark**

The Last Guardian

A boy and his boy

- » **Platform**
PlayStation 4
- » **Style**
1-Player Big
Baby Sim
- » **Publisher**
Sony Computer
Entertainment
- » **Developer**
Team Ico
- » **Release**
A long-
running joke

You may know The Last Guardian as the game about a boy and his weird bird/lizard/cat thing. However, that wasn't the original vision of director Fumito Ueda. With development of the long-awaited game shifting to PS4, gamers will now experience the adventure as its creator originally intended.

"I always wanted to explore the relationship between a boy and another, more gigantic boy." Ueda told us through a translator. "On the PS3, we could only have one boy on-screen at a time, so we had to alter our plans and downgrade the second character to that monster thing. The power of the PS4 not only allows us to double our 'boy number,' but to also make one of the boys very, very large."

Ueda also confirmed that that the giant boy is what connects The Last Guardian to Team Ico's previous titles. "He is the child of Yorda and that badass desert colossus," Ueda says. All other details about The Last Guardian – including what it's about, what you do, and why it's taking so long – remain unknown. Hopefully we'll find out more in a post-mortem interview once the game is canceled. » **Darth Clark**



Far Cry 5: The Zoo

Taking the hunt to new extremes

- » **Platform**
PlayStation 4
Xbox One • PC
- » **Style**
1 or 2-Player
Poaching
- » **Publisher**
Ubisoft
- » **Developer**
Ubisoft
"The Anti-PETA"
Montreal
- » **Release**
October 4

Ubisoft has revealed the next installment of Far Cry, and the setting for the new adventure is already causing controversy. It takes place entirely inside California's San Diego Zoo. "It took us a few tries, but we've finally homed in on what players enjoy," says creative director Alex Hutchinson. "Hunting down and killing exotic animals is now front and center, and more enjoyable than ever."

When asked if the zoo has been taken over by terrorists or a crazy dictator, Hutchinson just looked confused. "Nope, it's just the zoo. The game starts with you buying a ticket, and then it's off to the races." While the new location means Far Cry 5 will have a smaller open world, it will be packed with depth. "San Diego Zoo contains over 650 species of animals," Hutchinson says. "We're determined to let you kill all of them."

Other popular elements from the series will also carry over. "Some animals are located on top of a really big radio tower," Hutchinson explains, "so before you kill 'em, you have to solve one of our first-person

climbing puzzles that fans tolerate so much." Like in previous installments, the point of killing these animals – and what seems to be the sole objective of Far Cry 5 – is to craft new items. "You're going to craft so many wallets!" Hutchinson says. "Eventually you'll

craft a huge wallet to hold all your smaller wallets. It's totally meta."

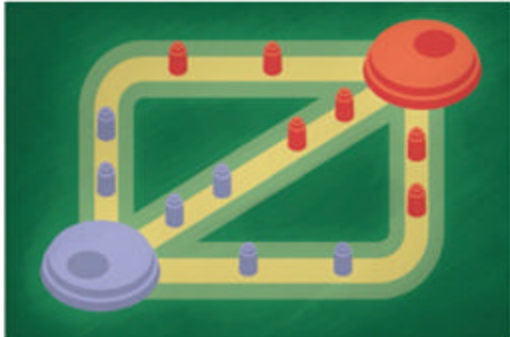
Far Cry 5 will be available for \$59.99, or as a free compensation gift for players who buy this year's inevitably buggy installment of Assassin's Creed. » **Darth Clark**



Some MOBA
A league of their own

gameformer PLATINUM
Style 6-Player DOTA Publisher Shrug
Developer Whatever
Release Forever In Beta ESRB T

Not to be outdone by other publishers getting into the hot Multiplayer Online Battle Arena space, this publisher's new title is destined to sweep electronic sporting. The game will be completely unique, just like every other entry in the genre.
To make sure anyone can hop in and hang out around little towers, what's-its-game is embracing a payment model, probably. It is both competitive and cooperative, and - wait, are there tournaments for these things? Let's just say there are tournaments.
Whoever makes this MOBA is pulling from its diverse cast of beloved characters to fill out the varied stable of heroes, like fast-but-weak gun guy, sexy fire witch, and the slow swordsman. You click through lanes, something something champions, and buy cosmetic items. I already spent \$575 on a collection of sexy trucker hats ("Your Carry Is Dirtier Than My Truck!"), and I wouldn't spend money on anything bad, so logic dictates that this game is great. » Darth Clark



9.75

- PC
» Concept Characters and lanes
» Graphics Like other games by the publisher, but a little cartoonier
» Sound The soundtrack is reminiscent of thousands and thousands of rapid-fire mouse button clicks
» Playability I skipped the tutorial but I'm optimistic the player community will help ease me in
» Entertainment More accessible than other MOBAs. Also, ARAM, CC, IAS, and DPS
» Replay Value You only play this now



Metroid Dread
Return to flat form

Style 1-Player Shooter (8-Player Online)
Publisher Nintendo Developer Nintendo
Release Should've Been The Early '90s ESRB E10+

Samus' legions of dedicated fans have long cried for her beloved series to return to its 2D roots. Well, Nintendo has heard our demands and has finally delivered - technically.
The company seems unwilling to abandon the formula established in the 3D Metroid Prime games, so Samus' return to planet SR388 has been completely built within id Software's 23-year-old Wolfenstein engine. This FPS comes complete with a smattering of pixelated, two-dimensional enemies that appear to have been imported straight from Super Metroid. This gives everything a 2D vibe without reverting to the side-scrolling exploration that you know and adore.
If you like Doom, Wolfenstein, and terrible misunderstandings of a fanbase's desires, you can have a good time with Metroid Dread. I, however, like none of those things. » Darth Clark

- 5
Wii U • 3DS
» Concept Give fans a new 2D Metroid
» Graphics All the enemies are all faced to the side, and that doesn't change even when you strafe circles around them
» Sound The boot-up menu tells me my Wii U's soundcard is outdated and gives a number for id Software's disconnected customer support line
» Playability It's more fun when you unlock god mode and unlimited ammo by typing in "JUSTIN BAILEY"
» Entertainment Still better than Other M
» Replay Value Seriously. Other M was so bad

INVISIBLE ENEMIES
Usually video games let you see your enemies, but sometimes they don't. Think you know your invisible foes? Match the names of the vision-defying characters to their pictures below.

- 1. Gray Fox — Metal Gear Solid
2. Kerrigan — StarCraft
3. Darklurker — Dark Souls II
4. Ganon — The Legend of Zelda
5. Novistador — Resident Evil 4
6. Intangir — Final Fantasy VI
7. Sting Chameleon — Mega Man X
8. The Unseen — Diablo
9. TIE Phantom — Star Wars: Rebel Assault II
10. Stealth Sneak — Kingdom Hearts

Grid for matching invisible enemies with pictures. Includes a list of answers at the bottom: 1:A, 2:C, 3:I, 4:E, 5:I, 6:H, 7:D, 8:G, 9:B, 10:F



Mortal Kombat X

Chasing gory glory

» **Platform**
PlayStation 4
Xbox One
PlayStation 3
Xbox 360 • PC

» **Style**
1 or 2-Player Fighting
(2-Player Online)

» **Publisher**
Warner Bros. Interactive

» **Developer**
NetherRealm Studios

» **Release**
April 14

In 2011, Mortal Kombat received a shot in the spine that revitalized the series in a big way. Mortal Kombat returned to its roots by reintroducing the 2D mechanics the franchise was founded upon. The reboot proved successful, thrusting the franchise back into the forefront. With NetherRealm Studios determined to deliver a familiar, yet vastly expanded experience, Mortal Kombat X hopes to continue the success of its direct predecessor.

The story begins shortly after the end of the most recent Mortal Kombat, which retold the events of the first three entries of the series. Mortal Kombat X's narrative spans the next 25 years in the universe, featuring familiar faces like Scorpion, Sub-Zero, and Raiden, plus several new ones.

One of the new fighters, Ferra/Torr, showcases the new character scaling being introduced. "You'll notice in previous Mortal Kombats, there hasn't really been a difference in scale in character size," says designer Derek Kirtzic. "It's not until we started doing Injustice that we started bringing in large-scale

characters like Bane and Doomsday. With MK, we wanted to start bringing in some of that as well. So you'll notice that Goro is very large in comparison to normal characters, and Ferra/Torr is pretty large in scale."

Mortal Kombat X builds upon the gameplay of the previous entry, while also taking cues from NetherRealm's DC Comics-licensed fighter, Injustice: Gods Among Us. "With Injustice, you had superheroes that could almost pick up planes and smash you with them," Kirtzic says. "With Mortal Kombat X, it's more used for spacing than it is for an unblockable damage like it was in Injustice. With Mortal Kombat, you can actually block any of the level interactions, along with traversing space. What we've noticed is that corner pressure is a pretty prevalent thing in fighting games, and bringing in the level interactions that help you get out of those corners is a real big plus."

Mortal Kombat X brings back character variations, giving each fighter three different styles for the player to choose from. Unlike this

concept's implementation in Deadly Alliance and Deception, which allowed players to switch between the three styles during rounds, Mortal Kombat X requires players to choose the variation before entering the fight. This gives each battle a rock-paper-scissors type of strategy, as players can plan their fight style around what could best counter that of their opponent.

NetherRealm is focused on injecting Mortal Kombat X with replayability. The Challenge Tower, which made its debut in 2011, is being reincarnated in the form of three separate towers that the studio plans to update regularly. One tower changes on the hour with damage modifiers and event frequency increasing as you climb higher, and another changes each day and provides random modifiers with more chaotic permutations for each challenge. The third is designed around special occasions. This premier tower changes every week on average, and includes holiday and special event towers. Kirtzic was tight-lipped about their plans for the tower, saying, "You'll just have to see



Those wanting to recreate classic match-ups won't have a problem doing so with Mortal Kombat X's roster



The powerful sorcerer Quan Chi will be a formidable opponent for players

what we have in store." Players can choose their character for each challenge.

Making Mortal Kombat X players even more likely to check in each day, a new Faction Wars system sees players taking up the flag of one of five in-game factions. Every action players do in-game – whether in online or single-player modes – earns points for their team. The faction with the most points at the end of each week receives special rewards. Daily faction challenges, such as "perform five uppercuts today" or "win two ranked matches" also reward points to factions with players who complete them.

Despite all of these connected features, Kirtzic insists NetherRealm is not abandoning players who enjoy playing offline. "You don't have to play online or in online game modes to participate in the Faction system," he says. "We want to make sure that the people who play single-player still benefit from this global system that we have. We also want to make sure there's enough content there for people that just like to play single-player and don't like to get their ass kicked online."

With NetherRealm expanding on previously successful concepts and implementing multiple new community-driven features to keep players coming back for more, Mortal Kombat X appears ready to come out swinging. » **Brian Shea**



A large percentage of Mortal Kombat X's roster is new faces, but that doesn't mean they won't find themselves facing some familiar ones

Adr1ft

The quiet horror of space

» **Platform**
PlayStation 4
Xbox One • PC

» **Style**
1-Player Adventure

» **Publisher**
505 Games

» **Developer**
Three One Zero

» **Release**
Summer

The death of mid-tier publishers like THQ and Midway over the past decade has left a gulf in the industry between the triple-A titles from major players like Activision and the retro-influenced indie games that pervade digital storefronts today. But in recent years, developers with years of experience working on big-budget games have jumped ship to create smaller titles with indie sensibilities while preserving the high production values more commonly associated with multi-million dollar projects. Add Three One Zero's Adr1ft to the list of these promising projects.

Developed on Unreal Engine 4 by a small team that boasts résumés including BioShock Infinite, Halo, and God of War, you could be forgiven for mistaking Adr1ft as a triple-A game. "I think there's a real gap in the marketplace where this game can fit in," says creative director Adam Orth. "It's a four-hour experience, it's going to be in the \$20-30 price range, and it can be completed in one sitting. It's going to have kick-ass quality production value."

Anyone who enjoyed the sci-fi thriller *Gravity* should pay attention to Adr1ft. It centers on a female astronaut who wakes up

with no memory of why she's drifting aimlessly in space – or why the space station she was presumably posted on looks like a Lego set smashed to bits by a rambunctious child. With her EVA suit running low on oxygen, this lone survivor struggles to repair the spacesuit while piecing together the events that led to this worst-case scenario.

In the vein of games like *Gone Home*, Adr1ft shelves the bombastic firefights and over-the-top setpieces that serve as the currency for many blockbusters in favor of a quiet, slower paced experience driven by the tension of trying to survive the harrowing circumstances. "We really want to amplify the horror of the reality of the situation," Orth says. "It's not a horror game, but we want to make sure it feels like that."

The leaking EVA suit being in emergency mode adds another complication to the survival scenario. Oxygen is already a commodity for simply staying alive, but the propulsion system also uses the resource to propel you through the environment. This turns navigation into a disquieting puzzle of sorts, as you must calculate your trajectory to make sure you can grab one of the oxygen tanks drifting

in the wreckage to manually replenish your stock. You can hear the oxygen depleting as you use the unique controls to move through the broken station and debris fields. When your oxygen supply starts to run out, your breathing sounds panicked.

The eerie silence of space amplifies this tension. Like *No Country For Old Men*, Adr1ft forgoes using a pervasive music score to set the mood, instead leaving you to the sound of your struggling breath and the broken ramblings of the space station's A.I. administrator. In moments where music is used, like one sequence that plays Beethoven's "Pathétique" piano sonata as you drift through space, it brings a calming sense of beauty to floating above Earth. Even though you may only be minutes away from suffocating, there are worse ways to go.

Exploring the decimated space station, the player must find repair bays to restore the suit's functionality, with the goal of getting it back to 100 percent. As the suit stabilizes, the need for finding oxygen tanks diminishes. This allows the player to focus on trying to get the escape pod back online and learn the stories of the other astronauts that called the base home



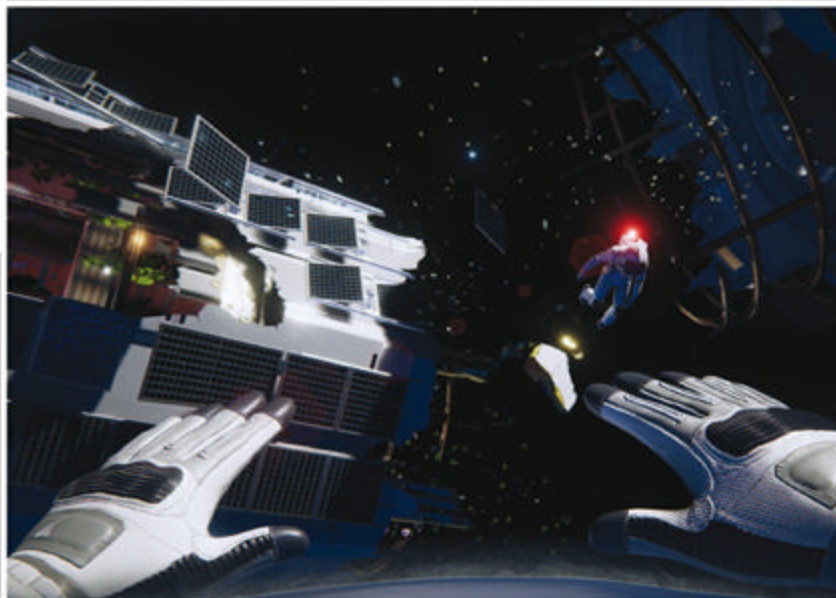
along the way. Audiologs and personal trinkets littered in the wreckage tell the backstories of your deceased compatriots, revealing the fragility of their circumstances and the real-world issues they dealt with even while stationed in space. "These are real people with real problems," Orth says. "One of the characters, his whole story is told through him speaking at an AA meeting he's attending on the station. He's telling his narrative through his struggles with addiction and his struggles on the ship."

Three One Zero hopes to pull off this delicate balance between environmental problem solving, stressful resource management, and introspective storytelling through all five stages of the game. *Adr1ft* may be a far cry from the giant explosions and overblown acting of games like *Halo* and *God of War*, but even in the pre-alpha stage it looks the part of a high-end production.

"It's been a fun game to make because it's been so different," Orth says. "It feels like we're headed down the road toward something special and unique. People who play games are smart people. I want to entertain people but also stimulate their brain a little bit." » **Matt Bertz**



Players must explore the environments to find repair bays and eventually get the escape pod working



Waking up in the wreckage of a space station hovering above Earth, you must struggle to survive this harrowing predicament



Better With Rift

During our demo of *Adr1ft*, we also got to play the game using the DK2 model Oculus Rift. Up to this point, the best demos I've played have been those that lock the player in a cockpit, like *Elite: Dangerous* and *Eve Valkyrie*. *Adr1ft* is the only first-person game that hasn't caused a disconnect for me between my body (which knows it's stationary) and my mind (which is moving along with the character on screen). This is likely achieved because the character isn't making swift movements, but drifting through zero gravity at a slow pace.

I found the Rift to be the superior way to play, because you have more spatial awareness than you do on the flatscreen version. You can get right up close to objects of interest, grabbing oxygen cans is easier, and tilting your head allows you to read your vitals in the EVA helmet's digitally projected HUD.

Three One Zero creative director Adam Orth hopes the game can excel on the nascent platform. "I don't necessarily think games are going to be the killer app for Oculus, but our goal is to make the killer game app for the Oculus," he says. "Just the nature of our game hits a lot of the checkboxes automatically that make it perfect."



Star Citizen

Chris Roberts' ambitious space project enters a critical year of development

» **Platform**
PC

» **Style**
Online Multiplayer Action

» **Publisher**
Roberts Space Industries

» **Developer**
Cloud Imperium Games

» **Release**
2016

The majority of crowdfunded games have a hard time raising their modest funding goals. But when Wing Commander creator Chris Roberts announced plans to fill the void of the largely vacant space combat simulation genre, it proved to be a secret recipe for raising money beyond anyone's wildest dreams.

Since its announcement in 2012, Star Citizen has collected more than \$72 million in pledges from 745,000 supporters and counting, with expectations that its funding will cross the \$100 million mark by year's end as players continue to stockpile ships and back new stretch goals. Cloud Imperium isn't attacking development with a fighter squadron of devs; this budget

gave it enough resources to tackle this project with a constellation of talent that now spans six studios spread across four countries.

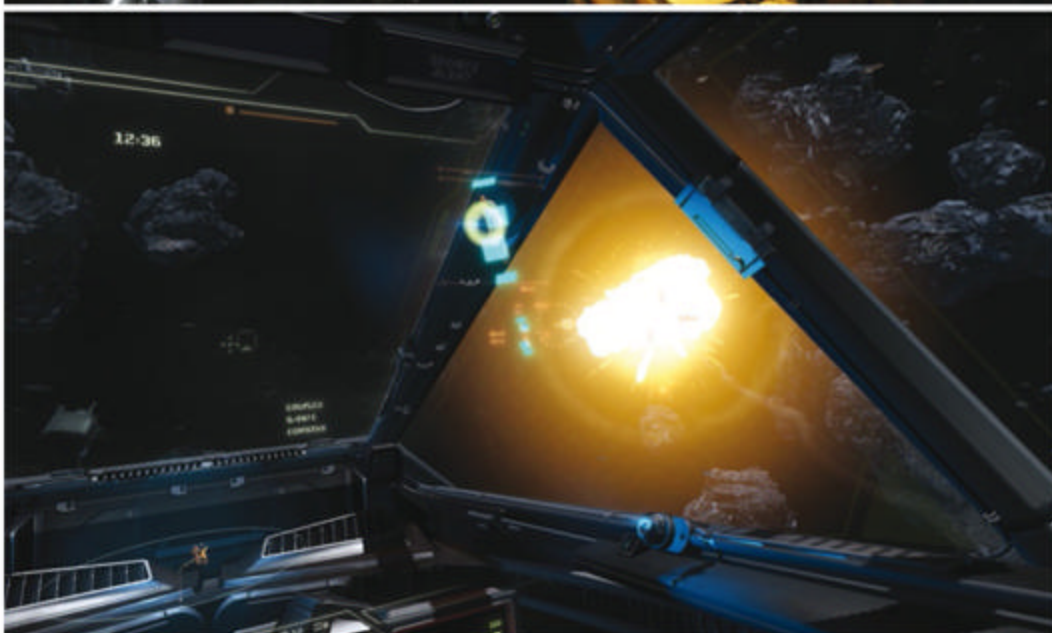
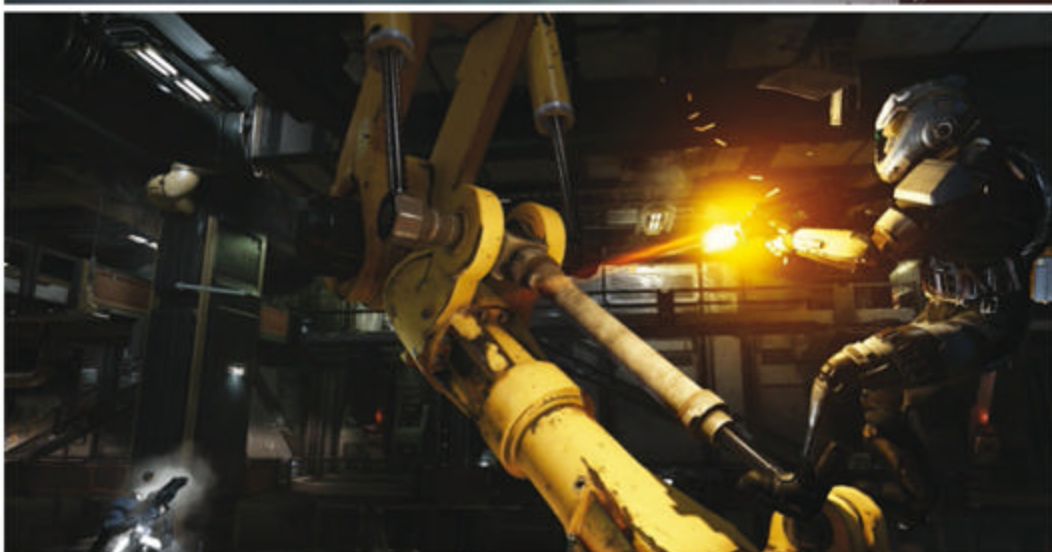
By the end of 2016, Roberts envisions Star Citizen as a gigantic persistent universe spanning 130 star systems. The signature space combat of games like Wing Commander and X-Wing serves as the core of the experience, but the game will eventually support first-person combat, a robust economy powered by supply and demand, planetside bases to explore, and a campaign dubbed Squadron 42 that will play out over the course of a trilogy.

The 745,000 backers aren't just wildly spending cash to fuel this dream; they're also

helping shape the kinds of activities players can expect. "You would think because this is space combat that everyone would want to shoot each other," Roberts says. "But no, when we had a poll of what players wanted to be the most, 67 percent of the people wanted to be explorers...Based on that, we have a lot of nonviolent roles that you can do like mining, trading, and exploration. We've also got other things like rescue and recovery."

The next year is critical in getting this Death Star-sized project moving toward the full commercial release. Speaking to Roberts at D.I.C.E., he gave us an update on the various modules that backers will experience in the next 12 months. » **Matt Bertz**





The Star Citizen Road Map

Set Your Blasters To Alpha » The first batch of new content coming to backers this year is the first-person shooter module. This proto-type features two modes that pit two groups of eight against one another. The first is your classic Team Fortress-style skirmish that takes place in the Gold Horizon space station. The second takes combat into a zero-G battle arena much like the competition in *Ender's Game*, where players must master push and pull mechanics to navigate the battlefield. Both modes are supported by a progression system and versatile loadout options that allow players to customize their equipment. Look for this module to be introduced at PAX East, followed by a release to backers in the following weeks.

Star Citizen Meet And Greet » Following the FPS module, Cloud Imperium plans to release the first planetside social module in April. This update introduces a new environment for players to visit and also allows them to invite others into their hangars to show off their ships. At launch it will support chat and emotes, but the long-term goal is to incorporate live facial animations. If you have a webcam and a mic, your on-screen avatar will move its lips when you speak.

Expanding The Universe » Roberts says the first playable element of the persistent universe will likely launch mid-year. This early module only allows players to take off from one planet and land on another, but another more serious update toward the end of the year should introduce five planetary systems and some of the mining and trading functionality.

Enlist For Squadron 42 » By autumn, Cloud Imperium hopes to launch Squadron 42, the story-driven campaign that takes place in the Star Citizen universe. A callback to the glory days of Wing Commander, creator Chris Roberts says Squadron 42 currently features 70 missions that focus on space combat, but incorporate planetside missions as well. "It's pretty awesome to seamlessly go between flying, exiting your ship, getting into a firefight, running away from some pirates, figuring out how to crawl through the duct system, and coming out on the other side taking off in another ship," he says. "That gives you a good sense of the fluidity of the gameplay experience you are going to have. It feels really liberating that you can do all of that stuff."

MLB 15: The Show

Bringing emotion to the diamond



» **Platform**
PlayStation 4
PlayStation 3 • Vita

» **Style**
1 or 2-Player Sports
(8-Player Online)

» **Publisher**
Sony Computer
Entertainment

» **Developer**
Sony San Diego

» **Release**
March 31

During the 2014 season, Los Angeles Dodgers skipper Don Mattingly was often asked if Yasiel Puig's tempestuous approach to the game was an unwanted distraction. Mattingly walked a fine line with his answers, telling ESPN that umpires were only going to "put up with so much." His comments didn't seem to affect Puig, who ended the season with his emotions on his sleeves, celebrating after big hits and picking fights after getting hit by pitches. Whether it's intentional or not, Puig's presence on the cover of MLB 15: The Show accurately displays one of the game's biggest additions: player emotions.

In MLB 15: The Show, Puig gets fired up after he knocks in the go-ahead run, and dejectedly trots to first after he grounds into a sure out. Given his reckless approach to fielding, you may see him stretch out for a ball and make an acrobatic catch, or misread the trajectory of a ball that turns a likely double into a triple.

Developer Sony San Diego created more than 100 unique celebrations for specific players and teams like elaborate handshakes after home runs, authentic hand gestures to the dugout after hits, and batters determining the amount of effort they should exert in running to first base. A.I. controlled fielders no longer take the perfect route to track down a fly ball or its carom, instead making their best guess based on their fielding rating. Those awkward, body contorting, last-second lunge catches are also a thing of the past. If a player can't

get there, the game won't generate a ridiculous looking catch. The ball will likely fall, and if the player is positioned poorly, the runner may go for extra bases. These little touches are a part of an all-new motion system that applies realistic speeds to running, catching, and throwing animations.

Hitting is also receiving a small upgrade. If a batter is tasked to move a runner from first to third, they'll likely be looking for an outside pitch to drive into right field. The new directional hitting interface gives the player a better sense of command over this scenario. To angle the swing, the player simply has to hit the left analog stick in the desired direction. When a player looks for something on the outer half of the plate, it changes how inside pitches look. The camera placement moves from the center of the plate to the outside. It's a risk, but it can pay off if the player guesses correctly.

"Directional hitting is an evolution of timed hitting," says designer Ramone Russell. "If you hold up all day trying to hit home runs, you're not going to constantly hit home runs or fly balls. It doesn't work like that. Directional hitting allows you to play to batters' strengths. You can't override the type of hitter someone is."

The view from the pitcher's mound also looks a little different this year. Pitch placement now shows where the pitch will land as opposed to its breaking point, removing the guesswork. The trail that shows the proposed trajectory of the ball is colored red in the

strike zone and blue outside of it.

Other changes on the field include user controlled cutoffs (a feature Russell says fans have been demanding for years), a revamped system for slides and tags, more than 70 new animations for third outs, slightly different ball physics for fly balls and rockets into the gap. Additionally, fielder A.I. has a better handle on situational base covering.

Getting into the action is much faster this year. For the PlayStation 4 version of the game, Sony has lowered the load times by up to 33 percent.

A Baseball RPG?

Get used to the idea of collecting loot in a baseball game. As odd as this sounds, there's a little bit of Diablo in The Show's DNA. For the majority of the modes in MLB 15, Sony turned to RPGs for inspiration. When a player boots up the game for the first time, a list of unlockable cards appears onscreen. These items consist of gear like licensed batting gloves, authentic Topps trading cards, odd ritual items like Rico Carty's candles, and brand contracts from companies like Nike and Louisville Slugger.

The gear is used mostly in Road to the Show, the trading cards are once again for Diamond Dynasty, the contracts infect Franchise mode, and those weird ritual items are for Road to the Show. Hundreds of items are available to unlock, and Russell says they want them to be "handed out generously." Players receive them for playing games,



New player emotions add drama to the action on the field



The show features authentic light sources that reflects the lighting for the time of year. The sun moves realistically as games unfolds. Pre-game, players are asked to set the time of year and day

The Laundry List

Sony continues to iterate on every aspect of the show. Here's a list of some of the changes coming to MLB 15.

- More than 45 new signature home run swings
- More than 50 new personal pitching motions
- More than 90 new personal batting stances
- More than 120 recaptured batting stances
- More than 120 recaptured pitching motions
- More than 700 new gameplay animations
- More than 900 new presentation animations
- Editable franchise contracts
- GM history records
- Less fans sitting in the cheap seats for low attendances
- Quick defensive shifts
- New quick count adjustments
- Three new cleats styles
- Four new fielding glove brands
- Four new bat brands
- Four new batting glove brands
- "Without foot guard" shin guards
- Battling helmets without flaps
- Player-worn necklaces
- Extra-wide wristbands
- Base runner wrist guards
- Low stirrups
- Left analog stick bunting
- 40 new tracks for stadium and ambiance music
- Umpire challenges (not user initiated)
- Real player Twitter feeds for all players who use Twitter

breaking records, and even for logging into the game each day. Like all collectibles these days, the cards vary in rarity from common to the rare "Diamond" variety.

The items are hard to overlook, as they all provide significant advantages within their specified modes. The Road to the Show gear is clearly inspired by armor sets from RPGs. Each wearable piece of licensed gear (from shoes to fielding gloves) gives your player a statistical boost, such as a batting glove delivering bumps for discipline and power.

Outside of the gear, Road to the Show is largely unchanged this year. New touches include 10 new fictional minor league stadiums, and new camera tracking. Another cool little feature, which is present in all single-player modes, is a radio show that plays on the schedule screen. The show recaps the activity around the league, giving insight into key match-ups, player trades, injuries, and more.

Franchise mode offers a much different experience right out of the gate with general manager contracts. Each team pushes the GM in different directions, such as the Cubs' ownership demanding a divisional title, whereas the Twins just want a team that is over .500. The GM has a new set of tools at his or her disposal that makes the experience easier to follow for player progression, trades, and league overviews.

"We've completely overhauled our Franchise UI," Russell says. "The biggest complaint that we've always gotten for Franchise mode and Road to the Show is,

'I feel isolated. I know what is going on with my team, but I have no idea what is going on around the league.' We added a new league updates page so players have all of the pertinent information as to what is going on."

As the GM, part of your job is earning revenue. If your team is performing well, the dollars should pour in. Should your team struggle, there's the chance you may have an ace up your sleeve in the form of a rare contract card. As strange as it is that all of the sponsorship contracts are only available in randomly gifted cards, they can help your team immensely. One of the contracts with Louisville Slugger gifts the team \$10,000 extra budget for every home run that is hit. A rare contract card sees Nike paying out \$40,000 for every win. When a contract is applied to your team, the sponsor becomes a part of the broadcast presentation.

Sony hopes that a new trade interface alleviates some of the frustration people have had in the past. Using a new NBA 2K-style trade finder option, players easily see what teams are looking for. "Last year you had to go in to each individual team to see what teams would want," Russell says. "Now, you just queue up the players you want to get rid of and the game creates an algorithm that tells you these are the trades that teams will accept. We also have a trade value screen that shows you the value of what you are giving up."

The ease of navigating menus extends to Diamond Dynasty, allowing players to quickly sort through cards, and feed

unwanted duplicates to their created player. "We've boiled it down to one player that is the staple of your team," says designer Nick Livingston. "He trains by eating MLB cards. You're basically feeding a monster. He gets better in certain categories from the strengths of the players he eats. If you want him to get better at speed, feed him that type of player. He's also an all-around player that can play any position. You just have to think about where you want him and what you want to feed him."

With a greater abundance of cards than last year, expect to see more cards in circulation and sold in the marketplace.

» **Andrew Reiner**





Salt And Sanctuary

Dark Souls and Castlevania had a baby

- » **Platform**
PlayStation 4
Vita • PC
- » **Style**
1-Player Action
- » **Publisher**
Ska Studios
- » **Developer**
Ska Studios
- » **Release**
2015

Ska Studios has made a name for itself with gothic and dark punk rock indie games like *The Dishwasher* and *Charlie Murder*. *Salt and Sanctuary* isn't an aesthetic stretch for the two-person developer, as it retains the gloomy but undeniably attractive art style of its previous titles. Where *Salt and Sanctuary* does step away from Ska Studios' previous titles, however, is its scope.

Salt and Sanctuary, to be blunt, is 2D Dark Souls. Many familiar mechanics from From Software's increasingly popular Souls series are present here, including a stamina bar, the ability to switch between holding a weapon with one or two hands on the fly, bonfires, and a familiar soul collecting system which

here takes the form of salt.

Creator James Silva does not attempt to hide the *Dark Souls* inspiration, flatly stating *Salt and Sanctuary* is a game he has personally wanted to play and is happy to see nearing fruition. "The really exciting, cathartic self-actualization part happens when you get to go from being a fan of a game – its themes, mechanics, styles, and the like – to actually being able to create, experiment, and branch within your own imagining of that universe that you're such a fan of," Silva says.

Both *Charlie Murder* and Ska Studios' two *Dishwasher* games were praised for impressive control and satisfying (and violent) combat. That attention to solid controls

and tight combat extends into *Salt and Sanctuary*. I found myself quickly pulling off leaping combos and rolls without issue while playing a beta build of the game. The platforming is also responsive, making platform navigation easy and fun – but that isn't to imply the whole game is easy.

Another aspect borrowed from *Dark Souls* is difficulty. *Salt and Sanctuary* is unforgiving in its training, forcing players to learn by way of experimentation and frequent death, rather than with outlined tutorials. Every death showcases a mysterious creature dragging your lifeless body back to your last checkpoint and it's up to you to recollect the salt (i.e. experience) you dropped when you died while fighting your way through the enemies – who have all now respawned.

Deeper in the game, you start to uncover Runes, which further pushes the game away from its *Dark Souls* inspiration and more toward *Castlevania* and *Super Metroid*. Runes are permanent upgrades that help you navigate the environment. One allows you to reach new areas by turning specific clouds into solid platforms, while another flips gravity in certain locations, allowing you to reach new heights that were previously unattainable. Despite the *Castlevania* and *Metroid* inspiration, Silva says there are currently no plans to implement a map. "Ideally, areas in the game should be characteristic enough to not require a map," Silva says, "With the world being as seamlessly interconnected as it is, it's nice to keep those *Dark Souls*-esque connections a surprise."

Despite being very close to a very popular game, *Salt and Sanctuary* feels original thanks to its merger of 2D platforming and unforgiving combat. » **Kyle Hilliard**



The Elder Scrolls Online: Tamriel Unlimited

A big move for Morrowind



The Elder Scrolls Online has seen significant changes since it launched on PC last year – now the game will be taking its updated buy-to-play model to current-gen consoles. While many of the upgrades were changes – like the addition of more responsive combat and systems for level-capped players to engage in – to refine and correct things that maybe didn't function smoothly at launch, other nuances are coming into play now that the title is heading to consoles.

Two veteran dungeons have been added since launch, along with the fact that all dungeons scale with the leader of the group. Repeatable quests offer compelling rewards to go dungeon diving, an incentive absent on release that we noticed way back when we provided our launch impressions. An account-wide Champion "alternate advancement" system now unlocks for level 50 players, allowing them to add passive abilities on a track that offers continual progression.

Some other broad improvements that have gone in since launch include gear dye, player-created heraldry, writs (mini-quests focused on crafting that provide a glut of resources), death recaps, chat bubbles, and improved experience gains in the Alliance War.

A criminal-justice system has also been added to the game, featuring more rewards – and consequences – related to interactions in the world. If you see an item you don't own laying on a table or chair, you might be able to take it, but you may not be able to run off with the item without the possibility

of punishment. This system extends to the potential assault and murder of Tamriel's citizens. Depending on your lifestyle, you can choose to become an outlaw living outside the confines of Tamriel's laws. This system echoes many of the more open-ended interactions that players have become used to from many of The Elder Scrolls single-player titles and gives them more choices in how to play and engage with the world.

With the shift to the buy-to-play model, players can still opt to engage in a subscription-like system with ESO Plus, which gives a number of bonuses and provides premium currency, the Crown. You won't need a subscription to use Crowns, and the Crown store

will host many convenience items such as mounts, pets, and costumes. Certain DLC will also fall under this flag, such as the Orsinium DLC – a full zone experience featuring new weapons and armor.

The control scheme of Elder Scrolls Online always seemed to be a solid fit for consoles, but many changes have been made to prepare the title for the console experience. These include improvements to UI sizes, analog-stick movement, and controls that allow for single-button use of abilities and skills.

Tamriel Unlimited will include all changes from launch to the 1.6 update, with further updates, DLC, and expansions planned for the future. » **Daniel Tack**

» **Platform**
PlayStation 4
Xbox One

» **Style**
MMORPG

» **Publisher**
Bethesda Softworks

» **Developer**
ZeniMax Online Studios

» **Release**
2015

Skeletons, vampires – just your usual day in the crypts below Tamriel





Darkest Dungeon

Difficult, deep, and delightful

» **Platform**
PlayStation 4
Vita • PC • Mac

» **Style**
1-Player Role-Playing

» **Publisher**
Red Hook Studios

» **Developer**
Red Hook Studios

» **Release**
TBA

Darkest Dungeon is a roguelike, party-based procedurally-generated dungeon crawler with dark stylized graphics and themes, conjuring up notions of doomed excursions to bottomless crypts and encounters with eldritch horrors too terrifying to speak of. The turn-based, position-critical combat offers some serious decision making when choosing your teams of adventurers, many of whom may never return home. Death is permanent, and in the depths of the dungeons your party members may die or lose their grip on reality, becoming a burden on the living as they struggle to survive for just one more room.

If all this sounds grim, it is – Darkest Dungeon is not a cheery tale. If you're up for a challenge, it's an excellent roguelike to throw yourself at, coming up with ideal group compositions, skill builds, and special artifacts to perfect the package. Your teams are always changing, from a roster of 10 different character types in early access (more expected in the final build). During your adventures, characters level up and gain resolve for the trials ahead, helping them maintain their stress levels as they face greater dangers.

Teams are made up of four party members at any given time, but players rotate from a much larger stable as heroes must take time off to rest in town gambling, praying, and drinking their stress away after a harrowing dungeon delve. The character roster is stylish and interesting, from commonplace archetypal role-playing fare like crusaders and highwaymen to grave robbers, jesters, hellions, plague doctors, and occultists – all with specialized movesets and skills.

Stress is a major mechanic in Darkest Dungeon, something a player must keep track



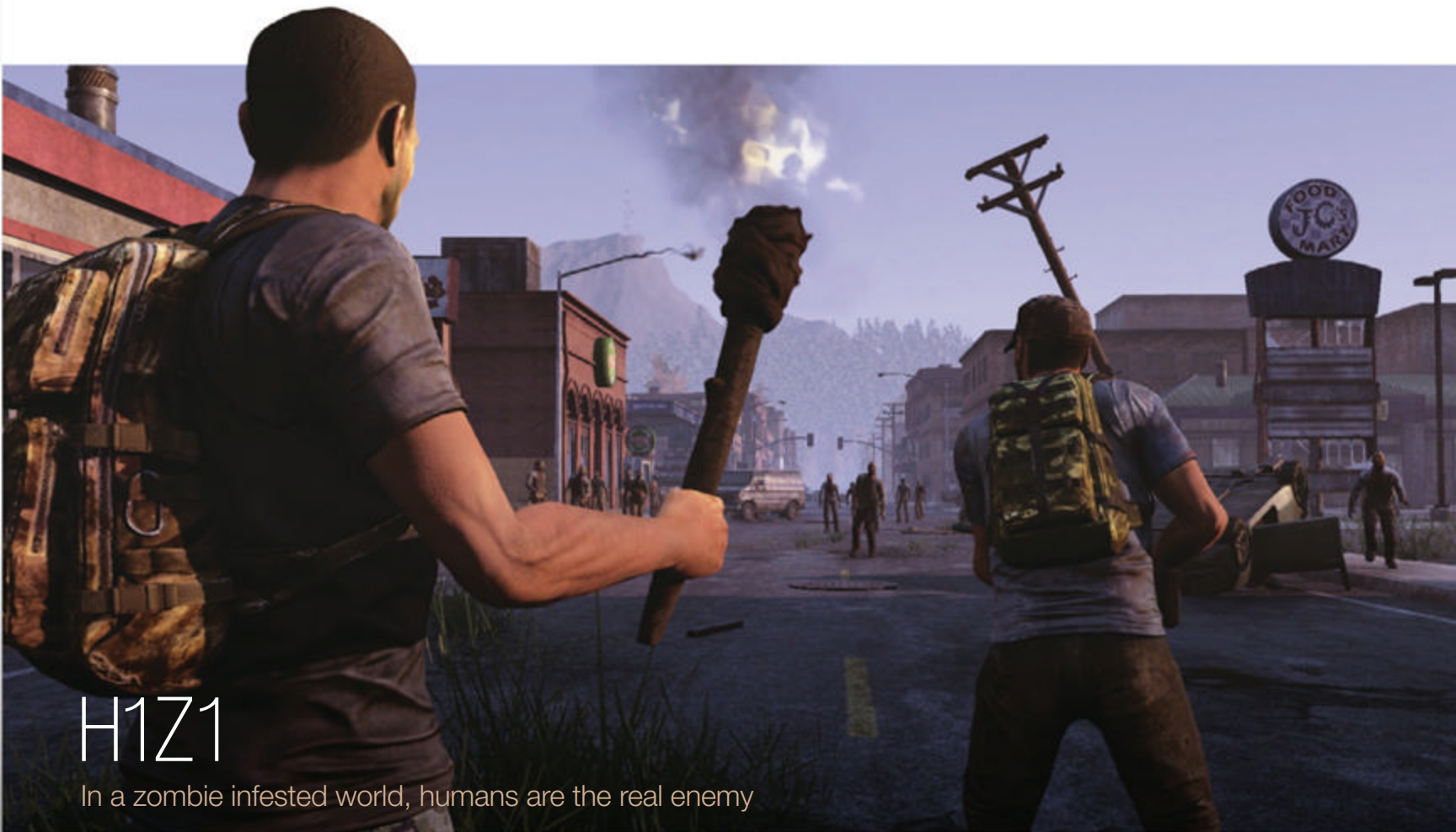
of at all times. As your heroes receive crits, watch other players fall in combat, get hit with special demoralizing attacks, or witness terrible horrors, their stress bar will fill. If the stress bar reaches maximum level, the character will endure a test of will.

On occasion, the hero uses the pressure to gain a nice buff for the duration of the dungeon, but the far more common result is a massive debuff that puts the character and the rest of the team in great danger. Panicked characters don't take commands and can mess up your line structure, masochistic characters will refuse healing and inflict self-harm, and still others could turn abusive and begin rattling insults at the rest of your team, which in turn raises their stress levels and sends the whole thing snowballing into a failed dungeon run and a heap of dead explorers.

Players must also keep a watchful eye on supplies during their dungeon crawls, especially torches and food. Without food, your party starves. Without torches, the party encounters much more difficult trials. Lack of light provides exceptional rewards, but survival is anything but guaranteed.

As dead adventurers pile up in the graveyard, players still make progress as they work on bringing the town hub back to life via relics found in the dungeons. These permanent boosts help take the edge off losing a prized hero or an entire crew of plucky novices.

While official launch is probably a few months away, players can start diving into the dungeons in Early Access on Steam, with a full release coming to PlayStation 4 and Vita later this year. The dungeons are dark, but they're looking extremely fun too. » **Daniel Tack**



H1Z1

In a zombie infested world, humans are the real enemy

From your first furtive fumbling as you attempt to piece together a bow or rip some berries off a bush to fill your rapidly emptying belly, H1Z1 is a game about survival against the elements, wild animals, zombies, and most notably other players. Any encounter on these open-world roads raises tension as you struggle to determine if those other humans are useful allies, roving gangs that would gladly kill you for the shirt off your back, or more nuanced friends that may abandon you in your time of need or wait for the opportune moment to lodge a hatchet in your back.

Much of the early game revolves around crafting the basic tools of survival, but if you live long enough or join up with a crew, you can engage in more advanced, long-term survival hinging on scoping out permanent shelter and sustainable supplies. You often find groups of like-minded individuals with their own bases on various servers attempting to defend their holdings from zombies and humans alike.

H1Z1 has fairly strict elements of permadeath – you lose everything on your person when you die, but retain your discovered recipes as a form of long-lasting

progression. Your pack is fully lootable, so when you're wandering around a deserted gas station or pharmacy smashing crates for salvage, you can make yourself a target for unseen denizens if you brandish a gun or other noteworthy weapon.

To encourage players to embrace the worst in humanity's need to survive, the concept of airdrops is currently in the game. Airdrop tickets are a paid feature (currently \$5), and summon a giant supply of goodies that fall somewhere on the server – maybe not even close to the person that issues the summon. Inevitably, these drop zones turn into set pieces not unlike the Cornucopia in *The Hunger Games* as undergeared players swarm for a shot at an assault rifle and seasoned veterans watch in the shadows and wait to attempt to pick off the winner of the grim melee to snatch the valuables.

As players explore, they can find resources like stray boxes of ammunition, valuable weapons, and one of the cooler finds – cars and vehicles. You need all the proper parts in place to get them running, and they might make you a target on the open road, but there's no better way to travel around the landscape – running over the undead and zipping by those roving gangs of *Mad Max* villains looking to waylay you for a pouch of berries and a handful of sticks.

H1Z1 is constantly evolving during its early access phase and we'll see how the zombie apocalypse plays out as we move toward release and beyond. We're told some things to expect in the future include wandering zombie hordes, female characters, wearable weapons, and makeshift weapons, armor, and clothing. » **Daniel Tack**

» **Platform**
PlayStation 4 • PC

» **Style**
Online Multiplayer Action

» **Publisher**
Daybreak Game Company

» **Developer**
Daybreak Game Company

» **Release**
TBA



Rolling around in a police car can make things a lot safer – but also makes you a big target

Borderlands: The Handsome Collection

Handsome Jack Gets A Makeover

» **Platform**
PlayStation 4
Xbox One • Vita

» **Style**
1 to 4-Player Shooter
(4-player Online)

» **Publisher**
2K Games

» **Developer**
Gearbox Software,
Armature Studio,
Iron Galaxy Studios

» **Release**
March 24

Borderlands: The Pre-Sequel was a fun game that built on the franchise's tone and loot-heavy gameplay loop. Unfortunately, as our review pointed out, the game felt penned in by last-generation hardware. Now, Gearbox has created a collection that tells the story of Handsome Jack while taking advantage of the horsepower of the PlayStation 4 and Xbox One.

Andrew Goldfarb, content manager at Gearbox, says that the team was surprised by the amount of people who asked during PAX East if the Pre-Sequel would be coming to the newer platforms. At the time, he says they weren't considering it, but the obvious interest made the team rethink their initial plan. The game came out on last-gen consoles last October, and Goldfarb says a surprising number of Borderlands players had already moved on to the newer systems. The Handsome Collection gives the studio a chance to package the entire Handsome Jack saga – including Borderlands 2, the Pre-Sequel, and their respective DLC – for people who missed out on it, as well as returning players.

Besides the 1080p visual makeover, one of the biggest additions is the inclusion of four-player splitscreen. Before, two players could fight on Pandora (and its moon) together in couch co-op. Franchise director Matt Armstrong says that kind of local



team gameplay was part of the series' lifeblood from its inception, but they couldn't push past two players. Last-gen consoles simply didn't have the memory to satisfactorily run the game with more players in split screen. Now, two players can team up against enemies in a 60 frames-per-second framerate, and four players can play with 30-frames-per second – the same as

Borderlands 2's single-player campaign.

Players who paid their dues in the most recent pair of Borderlands games can import their story progress, character progression, and badass rank into the Handsome Collection. Considering how much time many of us have put into Pandora and its moon, it's great that all of that exploration wasn't for naught. » **Jeff Cork**



Claptrap-In-A-Box Edition

Claptrap has evolved from a robotic pest in the first game to a playable character in Borderlands: The Pre-Sequel. Since he's essentially the series' mascot, Gearbox is offering a special edition of the Handsome Collection featuring a remote-control Claptrap, which spouts several of his signature catchphrases and has a camera in its eye that can be used to watch a live video feed from his perspective. Claptrap has internal gyros that allow him to cruise around on one wheel, just like in the game. It includes 12 exclusive lithographs highlighting the vault hunters that are in the game, and a steel case for the game. If you want it, it'll set you back \$400 – if you can track one down. Only 5,000 of them are being made, with half for the PS4 version and half for Xbox One.





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Stranded Deep

Procedurally generated Castaway

» **Platform**
PC • Mac • Linux

» **Style**
1-Player Action

» **Publisher**
Beam Team Games

» **Developer**
Beam Team Games

» **Release**
2015

The experiences of Tom Hanks' character in the 2000 film *Castaway* were harrowing, difficult, and sometimes horrific – all factors that seem like they could make a great video game. Australian developer Beam Team Games doesn't openly cite *Castaway* as an influence, but it's hard not to recall the film after spending even a few minutes with *Stranded Deep*.

Currently available on Steam as an Early Access title, *Stranded Deep* begins on the posh, personal airliner of a presumably wealthy lone passenger. Something goes wrong and the plane goes down, forcing the sole passenger – the player – to jump on an emergency raft, find refuge, and survive on a nearby small island.

My experience included chopping down trees to collect sticks with the goal of crafting a fire, getting distracted by a separate island in the far distance, and playing

chicken with a shark in the ocean on the way to see what the other island could possibly hold. It was potatoes, mostly, and a few coconuts. I also tried eating a few crabs I found socializing on the beach, but threw up immediately.

Your experience, however, could be completely different. After each plane crash, the world is procedurally generated, meaning your islands differ from my own. Even the ocean floor changes.

Beam Team's goal is to develop a world that doesn't rely on supernatural elements to inspire fear, but instead uses a sophisticated, realistic simulation to showcase the difficulty of survival when all you have at your disposal are the few items you thought to grab from the sinking plane on the way to the water's surface.

A crafting system allows you to combine your collected island items in a way that will

be familiar to Minecraft players. You can build weapons like spears to hunt sharks, traps to use in lieu of a fishing rod, and even, eventually, craft a comfortable domicile.

This style of game has become popular recently, but *Stranded Deep*'s focus on realism and the desert island setting gives it a good shot of standing apart. Day and night pass in real time, shark fins bounce on the surface of the water as an obstacle between yourself and your faraway goals, and the ocean moves and even foams at the coast as it should in nature.

Even as an Early Access title, *Stranded Deep* already feels well-realized, though its mechanics and functions have all yet to fall into place. Where most survival titles rely on the undead and the generosity or greed of other live players, *Stranded Deep* relies on good-old-fashioned fear of being alone without your cellphone in the middle of nowhere. » **Kyle Hilliard**



PlanetSide 2

A new front in an unending war



Since PlanetSide 2's launch in 2012, PC players have been in a constant gridlock over control of the war-torn planet of Auraxis. Four expansive, open-world continents house player counts in the thousands, while difficult skill-based gameplay and a reasonable approach to the free-to-play business model ensure enlisted soldiers keep coming back for more. The recent sale of Sony Online Entertainment hasn't stopped the now-rebranded Daybreak Game Company from charging ahead on the PS4 version of PlanetSide 2.

The sci-fi MMO shooter has been in closed beta since January 20, and unlike many betas nowadays, it isn't just a glorified demo. "This is a true beta," executive producer Clint Worley says. "We're actively working with the players on testing for bugs, getting player feedback, and making sure the game that we made on the PC really carries over well for the console crowd." Player reception has been encouraging, and Daybreak has already released a massive update in response to community feedback. With a second content drop already in the works, we spoke with Worley about what console gamers can expect from the PS4 version.

First and foremost, nothing about PlanetSide 2's ambitious size and scope is changing. Although the beta has been limited, the three-sided mega-wars should be just as daunting at launch, with the same player counts, continents, vehicles, classes, and weapons that are available on PC. "The code base between the PC and the PS4 is extremely similar, as in the exact same code base," Worley says. "When we do a PS4 update, we're basically branching off of the PC build and we're putting that out. While it's in submission...the PC [version] is still moving forward, but once it gets approved, we merge them back together." While not implemented in the beta, this parity will also eventually include user skins and

items submitted through the Player Studio.

While Daybreak is keeping the PC and PS4 builds as close as possible, there are some core differences. Servers on PS4 are region bound, and Daybreak isn't sure if it will offer an optional premium membership like on PC. Worley says that even though you don't need a PS Plus account to play PlanetSide 2, the team is aware that most players are already paying for one, and they want to respect that.

Balancing microtransactions – the core of PlanetSide 2's revenue – is also currently up in the air. Worley says there are still free and premium currencies, but they are being tuned specifically for console players. "We have an established business model on the PC, and that's great, but we're evaluating how a typical console player interacts with content, and making sure that the way we offer it to them is appropriate." Daybreak is keeping PlanetSide 2's economies platform independent, so any purchases you made in the PC version won't carry over.

As you might expect, the biggest changes come courtesy of the DualShock 4. "The issue that we're really spending the majority of our time on is player controls – making

sure the moment-to-moment gameplay feels like an FPS that you would expect on a console," Worley says. Daybreak is still nailing the control scheme down with help from the beta participants, and plans to offer a variety of modern shooter configurations. The UI is being completely revamped for controllers as well.

Rest assured, PlanetSide 2 is still as punishing as ever – new players can expect to die a lot as they acclimate to the pace of combat and start climbing the progression ladder. However, Daybreak is crafting a new, more concentrated tutorial map for teaching players the ropes, complete with a "smaller" player count of around 300 players. "[The tutorial] gives players a chance to try out all the different content in the game, go through tutorial instructions, and understand what they're getting themselves into," Worley says. "That way when they step into their first 200-on-200 player fight, they'll have a basic understanding of their role in the chaos." Once players rank up enough to "graduate" from the tutorial battlefield, they'll be ushered into the sprawling theater of war that has entranced PC players for years. » **Jeff Marchiafava**

» **Platform**
PlayStation 4

» **Style**
1-Player Online Shooter

» **Publisher**
Daybreak Game Company

» **Developer**
Daybreak Game Company

» **Release**
TBA





Supernova

A MOBA blasting off into space

» **Platform**
PC

» **Style**
1 to 10-Player MOBA
(10-Player Online)

» **Publisher**
Bandai Namco

» **Developer**
Primal Studios

» **Release**
Winter

The multiplayer online battle arena genre is rooted in the real-time strategy genre, but where many modern MOBAs have stretched the concept to include first-person shooter and action elements, Primal Studios' newest entry sticks close to home by doubling down on RTS foundations, allowing players to upgrade and choose their minions.

Deep in the heart of our galaxy a supernova pulses, ready to explode with enough force to eradicate all life in the galaxy. Only a few possess the technology to escape this massive blast, and there is limited room for those who make the journey. Therefore, the best warriors and champions from across the universe have converged on this supernova to do battle and see who will walk away with the means to save their race.

While Supernova's fictional setting sounds suspiciously like Gearbox's upcoming multiplayer shooter, Battleborn, Primal Studios'

gameplay sticks closer to titles like DOTA and League of Legends. Players join a team of five heroes who run down lanes and destroy minion armies, with the ultimate goal of converging on the enemy's main generator, which is called an auger.

Things diverge slightly from the norm in that players can upgrade the types of units that spawn from their base as well as combine items from drops to create accessories that further augment their heroes' abilities.

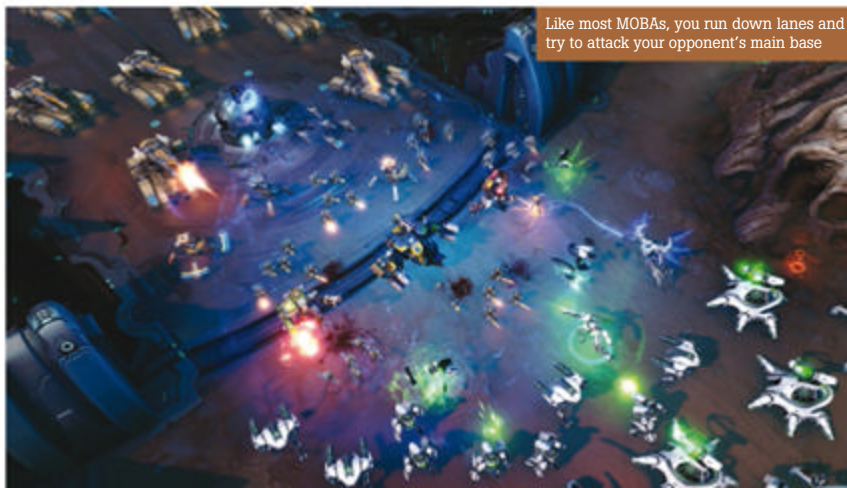
All the same, a well-balanced and diverse roster of heroes is the most important aspect of any MOBA, and Supernova's cast of commanders includes a variety of giant mechanized warriors, aliens who poison the ground beneath them, and cyborgs who unleash sniper-like blasts of energy. Bandai Namco gave us an exclusive look at two of these characters, B.R.O. and Reptus.

Terrible Thunder Lizard

Reptus belongs to a race known as the Veskar – a proud yet ancient race of reptilian warriors who were nearly eradicated by a force known as the Faceless. During the final onslaught, Reptus was enslaved by the Faceless and forced to be a gladiator in their arena battles until he escaped and began scouring the universe for other Veskar survivors. Reptus' talents make him an excellent jungle fighter, as he can take advantage of cloaking fields and surprise his foes. His Ascending Wrath ability lets him take out strong enemies fast, while his Pike Spiral area attack smashes a lot of little minions all at once. Reptus' ultimate Deathpike attack not only deals a lot of damage, but flings the enemy behind Reptus and further into enemy lines.

The Warrior WALL-E

Short for Battle Robot Operations, B.R.O. was a robotic defense unit built by a private company during a galactic civil war. When the war came to an end, however, the company went out of business and most of its units were scrapped. Decades later, this GTL-360 unit rebooted itself and set off to find its place in the galaxy. B.R.O. is a mid-to-close range unit with a powerful, arm-mounted sword. While this warrior remains a strong fighter up close, he functions better in a group. His Whiplash skill-shot damages groups of enemies in a line, and his 'Bring It!' buff makes him resistant to basic attacks. B.R.O. can also root enemy commanders to the ground, giving his teammates a few easy shots at their opponent. » **Ben Reeves**



Like most MOBAs, you run down lanes and try to attack your opponent's main base

Starships

Sid Meier returns to deep space



Last year's *Civilization: Beyond Earth* took the *Civilization* formula and sent it into space to explore the universe and terraform a new, alien world. However, that game didn't allow players to pilot the spacecrafts that brought humanity to their new home, and some fans felt this was a missed gameplay opportunity. As if to make up for this oversight, Firaxis is already set to release a follow-up, entitled *Starships*, that aims to do just that.

Centuries after making a new home, humanity receives a distress call from another off-Earth colony. Galvanized to fight the unknown, these intergalactic humans send their best fleet into the depths of space, prepared to fix the galaxy's problems.

The game begins with players constructing their fleet and choosing their Affinity. Beyond Earth fans should recognize these prototype races, which included the tech-savvy robotacists called Supremacy, the gene-splicing Harmony, and the Earth-loving traditionalists known as Purity. Each Affinity leader grants players a starting bonus, such as beginning the game with a random wonder, a quick tech boost, or extra starships.

Much like cities in *Civilization*, players discover new planets and incorporate them into their federation. Different planets generate different resources, providing your Federation with more fuel to build larger fleets and unlock new technologies. That would be pretty easy if it weren't for the other human

fleets constantly trolling the galaxy and laying down their own flags.

New planets offer players a chance to complete various, random missions – such as clearing out a group of trouble-making marauders – for rewards like extra tech and resources. Unlike most Civ games, however, these combat-based sequences play out on a separate hex-based grid where players take turns moving their ships through asteroid-laden battlefields in order to dismantle their opponent's forces.

Depending on your loadout, your starships can snipe other ships from across planetary orbit, cloak themselves before moving in close to launch a salvo of torpedoes, or unleash several waves of secondary fighters that swarm your enemy's sensors. These battlegrounds are dynamic maps that feature rotating asteroids and other objects that can obscure your line of fire and might prevent strategic retreats.

Completing missions for other planets opens up new trade routes with these worlds and might ultimately convince them to join your federation. Would-be star captains will need these resources, since your growing fleet needs to be constantly outfitted with new technologies that increase the speed of your engines, the effectiveness of your weapons, and grant you new modules that open up more customization options.

Firaxis announced *Starships* only a couple months before its release, so the game will be counting down to blastoff by the time this issue releases. That's good news; after seeing *Starships* in action we're eager to power up our fleet and conquer the galaxy. While Sid Meier's newest project is clearly built on top of many of *Beyond Earth*'s systems, it looks like it might have enough fuel to become a series of its own. » **Ben Reeves**

» **Platform**
PC • Mac • iOS

» **Style**
1-Player Strategy

» **Publisher**
2K Games

» **Developer**
Firaxis Games

» **Release**
March 12



Is This Just Beyond Earth DLC?

Starships take place within the same universe as *Civilization: Beyond Earth*, so players of both games might pick up on a few links between the two titles. For starters, *Starships* will read the political situations from your *Beyond Earth* save and incorporate these details into your *Starship*'s playthrough. So if certain factions from your playthrough of *Beyond Earth* were at war, they will still be at war in *Starships*. At the same time, Firaxis doesn't consider *Starships* an expansion to *Beyond Earth*, so players won't need to own that title to play *Starships*.

Galactic Civilizations III

Sandbox space strategy

» **Platform**
PC

» **Style**
1-Player Strategy
(4-Player Online)

» **Publisher**
Stardock Entertainment

» **Developer**
Stardock Entertainment

» **Release**
TBA

Space strategy title Galactic Civilizations III is poised to capitalize on the success of its predecessors. With many of the core elements of the franchise being maintained, this is the first time the turn-based series heads into the multiplayer realm. From humble beginnings on a home planet, players expand to new worlds, research powerful new technology, engage in diplomacy and war, and create awesome starship designs from scratch.

As with many 4X (explore, expand, exploit, exterminate), victory through military might is probably the most obvious way to win, but other routes to victory via influence and research are available if you're looking for a non-violent solution to the galactic conflict.

A single-player campaign featuring the story of the Terrans (Humans) clashing against the might of the Drengin Empire is available in the full release, but for now players can engage in

skirmishes during the Early Access phase.

Choosing your race is extremely important, as each one comes with a number of unique elements, including racial traits that have a significant effect on gameplay. Terrans, for instance, come with abilities that make them likable and mobile, while sentient artificial beings the Yor are unlikable but can repair ships easily and have a boost to production. In addition to special traits, race determines what areas can be colonized and come with unique ship equipment, planetary improvements, weapons, defenses, and even terraforming abilities. There are six different races currently available in Early Access, with two more on the way.

Players start each standard game with a colony, survey ship, and a colony ship. From there the space sandbox offers quite a few possibilities as the player chooses how to expand and develop. Allocation of time and

resources, like many other 4X games, is critical to ensuring that you maintain a powerful presence in the galaxy. One of the coolest parts of Galactic Civilizations III is freeform ship design, in which players can construct ship designs piece by piece, part by part, to create exactly the sort of spacecraft they have in mind to tackle specific goals. It's really fun to make your own cosmetic creations, but having full control over functional aspects of the craft – from engine, weapons, sensors, and everything under the hood – is something that core players will spend hours and hours on. If that's not your thing, there's nothing wrong with using templates and moving on to the next space battle or colony.

Galactic Civilizations III beta access is currently available on Steam, with many new features rolling out on a regular basis as we continue teching up toward the release.

» **Daniel Tack**



Building and customizing your own ships is a really engaging feature

Armello

A true digital board game



I've heard developers describe their projects as being inspired by strategy board games, but Armello takes it one step further. In all the ways that matter, Armello is a board game, but one that takes advantage of its digital presentation to add animation, music, and procedurally generated tile layouts. The crowd-funded title offers an intriguing mix of clever mechanics in a beautifully realized fantasy world. The early build I played still has some balancing issues, but the presentation is charming.

The land of anthropomorphic animals called Armello is in trouble. Its king has been infected with a horrible disease called Rot, which is slowly driving him mad and will lead to his eventual death. As the leader of one of various tribes, like the rabbits, bears, or wolves, you must quest across the land in an effort to save the nation, and stay ahead of the other tribes and their machinations.

Each player (either solo against A.I., or up to four online opponents) moves across a procedurally generated set of tiles in the turn-based action. Mountains slow movement, dungeons offer random rewards, and towns can be controlled to generate additional money each turn. Each space has its own properties, but the random layout of each game demands that you choose your path carefully.

Armello's most interesting strategic twist is its multiple paths to victory. The mad lion king is a threat to the entire land, and a viable path to victory is overcoming his palace defenses and slaying him in battle. But that's

a hard fight, so the better option may be to complete enough quests to find the four spirit stones you need to cleanse the king of his curse. If you're willing to give yourself over to the dark side, you can also win by becoming even more Rot-tarnished than the sovereign, and then conquering him to become the new mad leader. Finally, each player wins prestige throughout the game. If no one takes a more direct path to victory, the person with the most prestige when the king finally dies of his disease wins. Do you maximize certain skills in a bid to confront the king before all the other players, or focus on questing in the name of curing him? Multiple win strategies make for a more interesting competition, and force each player to pay attention to the others' actions.

An intriguing dice-based conflict mechanic helps resolve fights and perilous situations you encounter during your journey. Your rank in stats like Fight and Wits determines the number of dice you get to roll in relevant encounters, and each die can offer added attack, defense, and other effects. Players also have a hand of cards they can use to improve their chances and decrease an enemy's options. Equipment and follower cards are equipped for permanent boosts, and spells and tricks are played against your opponents. Alternately, cards can be burned during conflicts to get a one-time boost – adding a particular guaranteed die result into the resolution of the encounter.

Beyond its core mechanics, Armello includes a number of fun features that add complexity and variety. A day/night cycle changes properties on the board, like the availability of magic or the movement of monsters around the board. Every day, the mad king offers up a declaration, one of two effects chosen by his current favorite advisor – whichever player currently holds the most prestige. Declarations, like outlawing player fights or forcing everyone to discard their entire hand of cards, dramatically change the upcoming turn. But my favorite concept is the narrative-based quests given to each player, which guide you to a designated tile and present a choice about how to resolve a particular scenario through the use of your skills. I wish the game included more of this kind of storytelling, as the fantasy fiction is a lot of fun.

I played several games of Armello, and I'm impressed by its tight, interlocking systems. The small board requires constant conflict, which I like, but I hope League of Geeks continues to work on encounter balance. Too many conflicts result in both characters dying rather than getting a clear winner, with each being forced to restart at their corner of the map. The potential for a true digital board game is high, as it embraces the social and strategic potential of the medium. Armello is unlike any other title on the market, and I'm interested to see if its whimsical setting and smart gameplay finds an audience.

» **Matt Miller**

» **Platform**
PC

» **Style**
1 to 4-Player Strategy
(4-Player Online)

» **Publisher**
League of Geeks

» **Developer**
League of Geeks

» **Release**
Summer



Offworld Trading Company

A strategy legend returns with economic ambitions

» **Platform**
PC

» **Style**
1 to 8-Player Strategy
(8-Player Online)

» **Publisher**
Stardock

» **Developer**
Mohawk Games

» **Release**
2016

Game designer Soren Johnson has left his imprint on some of the highest profile strategy games of all time – from Civilization III and IV to Spore. After a brief foray at Zynga, he has returned to his PC roots with a new studio. Johnson's first project with Mohawk Games is a fast-paced economic war game packed with more excitement than a frenzy of trading on the Wall Street floor.

Offworld Trading Company is a real-time strategy game, but you won't be cranking out units and flexing your micromanagement skills in combat. This game focuses on the economic war raging on the planet Mars as differing groups compete for natural resources. Players must rush to collect a wide variety of resources on randomly generated maps with the goal of eventually buying out all that oppose them for domination of the red planet. Far outside the standard concept of a RTS that conjures up notions of StarCraft, Age of Empires II, or Command & Conquer, Offworld Trading Company plays more like a simulation or tycoon game, a sort of modern day approach to the now-ancient game M.U.L.E.

Planning is crucial to being a successful marketeer. If every player is selling off his or her water surplus, the price is going to tank hard and fast. It's up to you to determine what the hot resource is going to be down the line, rather than what's selling now. Resources come in 13 different varieties of unprocessed and processed goods, leaving plenty of room for crafty strategists to corner the market on essentials that aren't being collected.

Although there are no hoplites or tanks to send at your opponents, you still interact with

them constantly. The real-time fluctuating market prices and stock value of each player are constantly shifting, and there are plenty of tools to employ to take down the market leader, including espionage, sabotage, and EMP blasts to shut down critical production.

The concept of an auction/buy/sell trading game might seem like a slow, dull experience, but in practice the gameplay is fast-paced and engaging. Time flies by as you scramble to upgrade your headquarters, find the choice claims on the map, and keep an eye on

shortages in the market whether you are tackling the campaign or competing online.

Games generally take around 30-40 minutes and end when one player buys out the stock of all other players. It's a power struggle that doesn't revolve around crushing military might or the unleashing of a superweapon, and an interesting way to take the waning RTS genre in a new direction.

Offworld Trading Company is currently available as an Early Access offering on Steam. » **Daniel Tack**

Proper positioning of resource
producing structures is paramount



Warhammer: End Times – Vermintide

The Skaven rise

Fatshark is bringing four-player first-person co-op in the Warhammer universe to life, pitting a cast of five characters against hordes of the power-hungry Skaven race. The world of Warhammer is ending, and as Chaos draws closer, the Skaven invade the city of Ubersreik in force. You and three friends (or A.I.-controlled bots) must battle them back in a variety of locales; you won't simply be stuck in a city setting.

Players select one of five characters to play as in any given mission or map, select a loadout for melee and ranged attacks, and then battle through swarms of Skaven in a quest for loot and unlocks. Only one of each character can be selected for each run, so you can't have two Bright Wizards or Witch Hunters on the same mission – but you can outfit characters to your specifications with the loadout system. So even if your favorite class gets taken you can tailor things to your playstyle.

Classes play quite differently based on loadout, from heavy area-swinging hammers to precise rapiers, and each has class-defining abilities as well. For example, the Bright Wizard doesn't use ammunition in the traditional sense, but must manage spellcasting in order to not overheat and suffer damage. Along the way, players acquire class-specific

loot and experience progression at the account, character, and equipment level.

The Skaven have a diverse cast of characters that need to be handled in different ways, including stock swarmer fodder that can be easily dispatched but is dangerous in numbers, ratling Gunners that fire deadly bursts

that need to be dodged, Packmasters that can pull members of your party away from the group for easy feeding, and deadly Elite Packs that are best avoided altogether.

Warhammer: End Times – Vermintide is expected to launch on new-gen consoles and PC later this year. » **Daniel Tack**



» **Platform**
PlayStation 4
Xbox One • PC

» **Style**
1 to 4-Player Action
(4-Player Online)

» **Publisher**
Fatshark

» **Developer**
Fatshark

» **Release**
Summer

The Hum: Abductions

Extraterrestrial trills and thrills

Since the age of two, indie game designer Ariel Arias has been terrified by the thought of an alien invasion. As this fear began to run wild with his imagination, he started to create a fictional world gripped by fear after a mysterious hum began to echo out of the night sky. Cities on opposite sides of the globe could hear this supernatural whine, but no one could figure out where it came from. Arias' fear became so vivid that he decided that the only way to deal with this unique phobia would be by creating a game based on his fiction that he could share with the world.

The Hum: Abductions is the evolution of Arias' nightmares. In it, players will jump into

the role of Holly Sanders, a single mother recovering from the mysterious death of her husband. Late one night, shortly after the humming starts, extraterrestrial abductors invade Holly's house and her young son gets snatched up into the sky.

"This game is not about jump scares or fighting against monster-aliens," says Arias. "It is about a real phobia. I'm making the game that I both want and never wanted to play."

Arias cites combat-averse survival horror titles like Amnesia: The Dark Descent as inspiration for The Hum. But, in addition to the typical exploration and environment-driven narrative experience, a few sequences

take place inside Holly's head as she is experimented on by aliens.

"I played Gone Home and I loved it," says Arias. "I really like how that game managed to tell a story with indirect narrative and slow tension. I also loved the pacing of the P.T. Demo. When I saw that, I said, 'Okay, I need to achieve something like this.'"

Early trailers for The Hum: Abductions show off the game's unnerving pacing and eerie environments. Horror fans will have to wait until later this year to see if The Hum can live up to its inspirations, but even if The Hum fails to awaken new fears in those who play it, it will hopefully be a cathartic experience for its developer. » **Ben Reeves**

» **Platform**
PlayStation 4
PC • Mac

» **Style**
1-Player Action

» **Publisher**
Thotwise Games

» **Developer**
Thotwise Games

» **Release**
Summer



Code Name: S.T.E.A.M.

Fighting extraterrestrials for Honest Abe

» **Platform**
3DS

» **Style**
1-Player Strategy
(2-Player Online)

» **Publisher**
Nintendo

» **Developer**
Intelligent Systems

» **Release**
March 13

Code Name: S.T.E.A.M. isn't your typical strategy outing. Unscrupulous aliens are trying to take over the world, and you've been enlisted by Abraham Lincoln to thwart their attempts. The premise is silly, right down to the comic-book style and over-the-top voice overs, but Code Name: S.T.E.A.M. isn't all fun and games. It demands you flex your brain and pick your moves wisely – one rash decision could be deadly.

This tension shouldn't surprise those who have played other games by Intelligent Systems. After all, they are the minds behind the acclaimed Fire Emblem and Advanced Wars franchises, but Code Name: S.T.E.A.M. is carving its own identity with fresh systems and a zany concept. In this world, steam powers everything from your movement to what attacks you can execute, making battlefield positioning essential.

However, using up every ounce of steam each turn is not always in your best interest. Leaving some left in the tank gives you the opportunity to launch a counterattack should an enemy cross your line of sight. You must position yourself behind cover so enemies don't detect you, picking the opportune times to pop out and shoot them. Every enemy has a vulnerable spot on its body – a glowing orb – to exploit.

The battlefield is wrought with unpredictability. Enemies mask themselves behind cover, striking when you least expect it. In addition, even when you think you've made a dent, reinforcements often show up, surrounding you from behind. You also have a variety of enemies appearing; rippers are blind, but move toward any noise they hear, while if you stay in the proximity of eyestalkers, they'll bombard you with a flurry of attacks in the next turn.

The missions are equally varied. In my hands-on time, I did everything from rescuing civilians to escorting queens to facing down gargantuan bosses. Even how much you explore stages is a decision. Money and special gears litter them, and both are essential to upgrades, but are they worth risking extra damage?



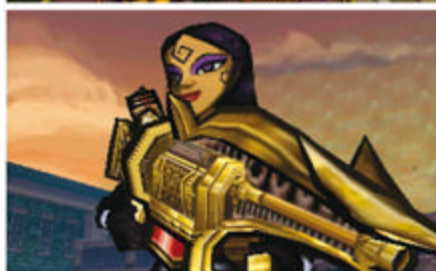
To the game's strength, every character plays differently. For instance, John Henry fires an explosive gun at range, and Lion from *The Wizard of Oz* can launch himself from high ledges to pounce on enemies. While this gives you plenty of options, especially in terms of positioning multiple characters (you can have up to four on the field at once), it is a slow-moving game. After every turn, you must watch the enemies execute their moves. Each map has heaps of foes, and animations can't be sped

up. Seeing your enemies closing in adds some tension, but it also makes matches longer than necessary.

Code Name: S.T.E.A.M.'s release date is right around the corner. I'm not convinced it has the power to measure up to the famed Fire Emblem series, but so far I've enjoyed thinking my way out of its challenges. A bonus? Rubbing shoulders with past historical figures like Lincoln and fictional characters like Tom Sawyer is exciting in its own right. » **Kimberley Wallace**

Taking The Strategy To Multiplayer

Code Name: S.T.E.A.M. boasts three multiplayer modes: death match, medal, and A.B.E. battle, which can be played via local or online. These modes aren't mind-blowing, but money and weapons you earn in them carry over to your single-player campaign. In addition, each mode has a different time investment. Death match can last up to 30 turns, but can end earlier by successfully taking out every member of your opponent's team. Medal lasts five turns and requires you to break down obstacles like boxes to find more medals than your opponent. A.B.E. battle is the fastest, putting you in first-person, while you and an opponent control presidential robots, with steam-powered shooting and melee reminiscent of Rock 'Em Sock 'Em Robots.



J-Stars Victory VS+

An action-packed anime crossover

If you're a fan of anime, get ready to have your crossover dreams come true. J-Stars Victory VS, which launched in Japan in 2014, is coming to North America. This marks the first localization of the title for North America, and it's also the first appearance on the PlayStation 4 in any region.

Featuring over 50 characters from the Shonen Jump series, J-Stars pits anime fighters against one another in team battles. The default setting is two teams of two primary fighters with a support fighter on each squad, but once you enter battle you focus on controlling only one character within the bout.



Each time a fighter downs an opposing character, a section of their "win" gauge fills. When a team fills three segments of that gauge, the match is over. During the course of the match, fighters also build up a victory gauge. When topped off, this allows the team to unleash powerful ultimate attacks.

Rather than using the traditional camera angle presented in most 3D fighters, the camera in J-Stars follows the fighter you're controlling, giving it an action/adventure feel within the structure of a fighting game.

In addition to free battle, which allows players to participate in one-off fights, J-Stars features several other modes. J-Adventure implements a map-based adventure with minor exploration-based elements and optional sidequests, while Victory Road encourages players to complete specific challenges while working their way through branching ladders of A.I. opponents. J-Stars Victory VS+ introduces an all-new arcade mode, which sends players against themed sets of A.I. opponents, giving the mode more substance than arcade modes typically found in fighting games.

With a robust roster, J-Stars Victory VS+ is a game every fan of Japanese animation should keep their eyes on as the North American release approaches. » **Brian Shea**

» **Platform**
PlayStation 4
PlayStation 3 • Vita

» **Style**
1 or 2-Player Fighting
(4-Player Online)

» **Publisher**
Bandai Namco

» **Developer**
Spike Chunsoft

» **Release**
Summer

The Stars Of J-Stars

The roster of J-Stars Victory VS+ is full of recognizable faces, but here are some of the more notable ones:

- **Yusuke** » YuYu Hakusho
- **Naruto** » Naruto
- **Goku** » Dragon Ball Z
- **Luffy** » One Piece
- **Ichigo** » Bleach
- **Kenshin** » Rurouni Kenshin
- **Gintoki** » Gin Tama
- **Korosensei** » Assassination Classroom

Etrian Mystery Dungeon

Atlus embraces the mash-up to keep Etrian Odyssey fresh

After last year's Persona Q: Shadow of the Labyrinth, which combined the classic dungeon cartography with Persona's slick style and great cast, the Etrian Odyssey series is once again getting the crossover treatment. Now the series is blending with the Mystery Dungeon franchise, which had previously merged with Pokémon to find success in Japan. Etrian Mystery Dungeon combines the character growth and skills from Etrian Odyssey with the roguelike gameplay and randomized dungeons of Mystery Dungeon.

Etrian Mystery Dungeon is tile-based, and your foes move whenever you do. This means positioning is essential. "The most important thing is to keep in mind the turn system, where every action is one turn, and to predict what the situation will be in the turn after your move," says Etrian Odyssey team director Yukari Yokoro. "You must also factor in your lead character's surroundings, the enemy's position, and their moves and properties. If you can keep track of all these, you can have the upper hand in most situations."

Enemies appear on the map as you dungeon crawl, allowing the opportunity for an ambush. The turn-based combat is replete with all the skills, status effects, and attacks from Etrian Odyssey, so you must put points into the skills you want to learn.

Players don't need to map out dungeons like in previous Etrian Odyssey games, but plenty of staples are still present. Infamous minibosses, called FOEs, are now referred to as

DOEs (Deorsum Occupo Extinguere). These baddies can escape the dungeon and wreck the town, potentially disabling some of your facilities. The classes from Etrian Odyssey are back along with a new wanderer class. This class has binding skills along with abilities that help you move around the dungeon easier.

A total of 20 dungeons are in the game, but you encounter less than half that number in the main story. "The dungeons in this game have what we call an 'anthill structure,' which can have multiple zones on the same floor,

interconnected with stairways that branch off to different routes," Yokoro says. "It's fun to try out some of those other routes in the hopes of finding more loot."

This mash-up definitely feels like an Etrian Odyssey game, but it has new lifeblood thanks to the Mystery Dungeon mechanics. From a brief demo, I discovered plenty of unpredictability mixed with a satisfying challenge that rewards patience and punishes rashness. True to both franchises, it's all about persevering. » **Kimberley Wallace**

» **Platform**
3DS

» **Style**
1-Player Role-Playing

» **Publisher**
Atlus

» **Developer**
Spike Chunsoft

» **Release**
April 7



gameinformer 90 GAME OF THE MONTH Apotheon

Relatively unknown developer AlienTrap Games has made a name for itself with this 2D action platformer inspired by ancient Greek pottery art. Not only does the game look great, the levels (based on various gods) are full of variety and surprises. Add in Apotheon's great voice acting and soundtrack, and this downloadable title is firing on all cylinders.

THE SCORING SYSTEM

10	Outstanding. A truly elite title that is nearly perfect in every way. This score is given out rarely and indicates a game that cannot be missed.	5	Flawed. It may be obvious that the game has lots of potential, but its most engaging features could be undeniably flawed or not integrated into the experience.
9	Superb. Just shy of gaming nirvana, this score is a high recommendation because the game reviewed is head-and-shoulders above its competition.	4	Bad. While some things work as planned, the majority of this title either malfunctions or it is so dull that the game falls short as a whole.
8	Very Good. Innovative, but perhaps not the right choice for everyone. This score indicates that there are many good things to be had, but arguably so.	3	Painful. If there is anything that's redeeming in a game of this caliber, it's buried beneath agonizing gameplay and uneven execution in its features or theme.
7	Average. The game's features may work, but are nothing that even casual players haven't seen before. A decent game from beginning to end.	2	Broken. Basically unplayable. This game is so insufficient in execution that any value would be derived in extremely small quantities, if at all.
6	Limited Appeal. Although there may be fans of games receiving this score, many will be left yearning for a more rewarding game experience.	1	"Your preorder has been canceled."

AWARDS

gameinformer PLATINUM	Awarded to games that score between 9.75 and 10
gameinformer GOLD	Awarded to games that score between 9 and 9.5
gameinformer SILVER	Awarded to games that score between 8.5 and 8.75
gameinformer GAME OF THE MONTH	The award for the most outstanding game in the issue

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Evolve

Homing in on the hunt

8.5

PS4 • Xbox One • PC

» Concept

Transform boss battles into a 4v1 multiplayer experience that caters to both competitive and cooperative players

» Graphics

The maps are detailed and varied. The monsters are beautifully grotesque, though getting close enough to appreciate them probably means you're dead

» Sound

A variety of environmental sounds cue you into the location of your foes, but the hunters' banter is too repetitive

» Playability

Solid and smartly designed controls make it easy to learn your character's unique abilities and use them effectively

» Entertainment

The 4v1 formula is original but inherently limited; how long Evolve holds your attention will depend on how much you enjoy the hunt

» Replay Value

High



SILVER

Style 1-Player Shooter (5-Player Online) Publisher 2K Games Developer Turtle Rock Studios Release February 10 Rating M

Turtle Rock hasn't been shy about getting Evolve into the hands of players. The developer provided play sessions at virtually every gaming convention over the past year, and offered fans extended alpha and beta sessions before release. That "proof is in the pudding" approach revealed the core gameplay experience of Evolve, but also opened the door to questions about its breadth and longevity. At long last, the final game is here, and remains true to what we've seen before; Evolve is a concentrated and highly replayable experience, if you can accept the limitations of its unique format.

Evolve offers up the flimsiest of narratives to frame its endless 4v1 conflicts. A burgeoning human colony on planet Shear has been overrun by giant monsters, and it's up to a ragtag crew of disparate hunters to hold them off and save whatever fleeing civilians they can. Like in Left 4 Dead, all of the character building happens through in-game chatter, which gets repetitive since players are limited to the first four hunters until they unlock new playable characters to spark additional conversation.

Turtle Rock has made a concerted attempt at fleshing out these hunters' personalities, but Evolve lacks the emergent narrative of Left 4 Dead; it simply feels like a series of loosely connected multiplayer matches. As such, gameplay is king, and Turtle Rock succeeds in serving up two very different experiences depending on which side of the fight you're on. While I enjoy the occasional bout as one of Shear's untamed beasts, the cooperative focus of the hunters is the greater draw for me – especially when teaming up with friends.

Friends aren't a necessity when playing Evolve, but it's important to note that single-player is just multiplayer with bots, and the A.I. performs admirably in some cases and falls flat on its face in others. Computer-controlled

monsters are appropriately challenging, knowing when to feed and stage up, when to attack, and when to retreat. A.I. hunters are usually competent, but a single mistake can spell doom for your entire crew, and those errors often stem from your bot companions. You can take over A.I. teammates with the press of a button, but staying on top of your own abilities in the middle of a showdown is work enough, so trying to juggle another character's skills rarely ends well. That said, humans are far more compelling to play with and against anyway, and matches don't require much in the way of verbal communication, so even random online squads are a viable and fun option (after you mute the insult-spewing mouth breathers that plague online games).

Matches are surprisingly fair, regardless of who is playing. A certain balance in the chaos comes from the sheer variety of playable characters, abilities, and match-affecting bonuses. My win/loss ratio has stayed impressively even, especially in the main attraction: evacuation mode. These five-round pseudo-campaigns sport an auto-balance feature, an overarching puppet master that keeps things as even as possible between rounds. Evacuation mode still doesn't tell much of a story, but the civilians you're saving (or killing) carry over from one round to the next and give a greater sense of weight to each victory and defeat – not to mention a healthy amount of bonus XP that speeds up the leveling process.

Evolve's progression system was criticized during the beta, but is less of an issue in the final release. Unlocking the next hunter in a given class requires gaining a one-star rating in each of the current character's weapons and abilities. A few of these challenges are annoying distractions (like stealth resurrecting creatures as Lazarus), but most make sense in the context of your role on the team and

force you to use your whole repertoire. I had every character unlocked by about the 20-hour mark. New hunters and monsters pop up with satisfying regularity, and you can always spam custom and solo matches for the more obscure challenges.

Longer-form progression is largely absent. After you've unlocked the last playable character, all you have to look forward to are incremental stat upgrades to your weapons, a few character skins, and customizable avatar badges. If you're a Call of Duty player who needs an endless stream of unlockables to keep you interested, you need to look elsewhere. Loving Evolve requires loving the minute-to-minute experience.

Ultimately, that experience is rather limited. No, not because of Evolve's monster count – despite all the pre-release whining about there only being three monsters, I still have fun going up against each beast after countless matches (even if Wraith is a total pain). Rather, the limitation lies in the 4v1 format itself. Nest, Rescue, and Defend are all interesting variations on Evolve's base Hunt mode, but they're still only variations (and are also not currently available as one-off skirmishes in online matchmaking). I would've liked more in the way of variety and challenges, even if it means occasionally straying from the asymmetrical five-player formula.

As it is, Evolve does its one thing remarkably well, and the few other gripes I have – including long, multi-stage load times and the inability to customize A.I. teammates when playing with friends – don't dampen my enthusiasm for playing more. Evolve's matchups offer a lot of replayability and competitive thrills, and I can see myself returning to it consistently in the following months – even if those play sessions do inevitably end with me lusting for more to do in the world. » Jeff Marchiafava

The Edge

As expected, there are some visual differences between the three platforms. PC users have the clear advantage in resolution, effects, and frame rate. The disparities between the home consoles are less obvious, but PlayStation 4 has a slight graphical edge over Xbox One. Ultimately, however, you should play the game on whatever platform you and your friends prefer – the visual differences aren't significant enough to change the overall experience.



Dying Light

The night is dark and full of terrors



Style 1-Player Action (5-Player Online) **Publisher** Warner Bros. Interactive **Developer** Techland **Release** January 27 **Rating** M

8.5

PS4 • Xbox One • PC

Techland originally introduced the Dead Island franchise using an emotional trailer that showed a family being affected by a zombie outbreak. The finished product, though fun, had a campier vibe than that somber trailer. With *Dying Light*, Techland comes closer to capturing the feeling of that trailer than any Dead Island game.

The story is full of action movie moments told in a more serious manner. With undead hordes roaming the streets, a shadowy organization issuing missions from afar, and a maniacal despot who will stop at nothing to attain power, bad things are bound to happen.

Though the narrative is immersive, the typically strong presentation can sometimes falter, hindering the impact of the story. Thankfully, the combat happens at a fast pace, making visual glitches easy to miss.

Dying Light's combat is at its best at close range due to the brutality of the melee animations, as well as the satisfying nature of the mechanics. Battles are enjoyable, but with the effectiveness of the equipped weapon playing a major role in the way a conflict pans out, enemies can become damage sponges until you craft a more effective instrument.

Scrounging for loot is essential to both crafting items and repairing weapons. The crafting system is accessible; creating items is as simple as discovering a blueprint, finding the required items, and crafting the desired item. Once I leveled my character up and found better weapons, I was formidable, but I became a true force to be reckoned with once I located firearms. Unfortunately, the gunplay mechanics don't feature the same polish as the melee combat, and I almost always reverted to that unless the situation necessitated heavier weaponry.

Avoiding conflict altogether is often the best

bet, so dodging the undead legions is crucial. This means a lot of running along the rooftops and climbing walls. Though the free-running system works most of the time, for gameplay that relies so heavily on those elements, the parkour of *Dying Light* just isn't reliable enough. The control scheme uses a shoulder button for jumping, allowing players to keep their thumbs on the sticks. It takes some getting used to, but in high-pressure situations, no amount of practice can prepare you for the inconsistency.

The main missions largely consist of either avoiding or plowing through the zombie packs on your way to a point on the map. Some missions require more exploration, but even those boil down to heading to a spot on the map and searching the marked area for an item of interest. With your character traversing the map so quickly, it's easy to miss the vistas provided by *Dying Light*'s pretty visuals, but every so often, it surprises you with a view of a great-looking world.

The variety comes from the side missions, as players encounter more off-the-wall characters and objectives that demand exploration, including the persistent sidequest of re-securing safe zones across the map. Randomly occurring mini missions also pop up as you traverse the map, giving you the option to help survivors fend off attackers, with rewards that make the pit stops worth it.

As the name implies, *Dying Light* is most tense when the sun sets. During the daytime, you feel as though you're in control of your encounters and rarely find yourself in over your head. This changes when the creatures of the night come out. Not only does Techland excel at creating a desolate feeling of being alone in the darkness, but what drives this desperate feeling is the introduction of

Volatiles – powerful and agile zombies that thrive in the dark. With Volatiles out, players are wise to avoid leaving the safe zones during the night, but Techland tempts players to go out and explore by providing boosted player stats and extra experience points. Even with these incentives, the heart-pounding implications make the decision to step outside after dark a difficult one.

The *Dying Light* experience is better alongside friends. Adding more players to the missions helps make difficult areas more approachable, and working together to explore the quarantine zone makes it a more enjoyable experience overall. You can play the entire campaign single-player, but doing so causes you to miss out on the opportunity to challenge your co-op partners in mission-specific goals.

Despite technical and parkour missteps, the rewarding combat mechanics, well-executed narrative, and excellent cooperative multiplayer bring players a delightful time in the shadow of the impending apocalypse. *Dying Light* is a strong open-world zombie game that delivers a good experience on nearly every front. » **Brian Shea**

» Concept

An open-world zombie game that combines free-running, combat, and exploration elements

» Graphics

The colorful environments and pretty graphics treat players to several great sights throughout the campaign

» Sound

Zombie grunts, survivor screams, and bloody splatters are laid over a fitting score

» Playability

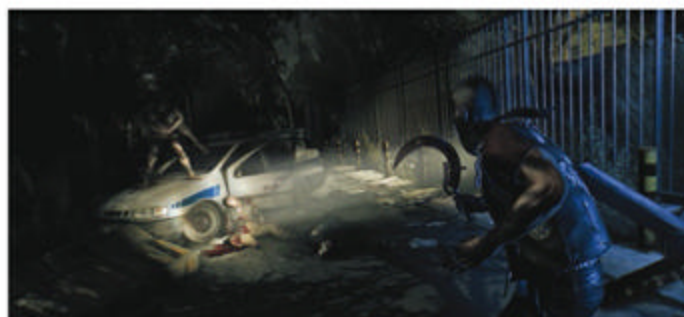
Free-running mechanics are good most of the time, and combat is varied and rewarding

» Entertainment

Tense and full of adrenaline-fueled moments, *Dying Light* is a blast

» Replay Value

Moderately high



Game Of Thrones Episode 2: The Lost Lords

Let the blood flow

8

PS4 • Xbox One
PS3 • 360 • PC • iOS

» Concept

House Forrester is pushed further into chaos in the second chapter of a six-part series

» Graphics

Asher's fight sequence is nicely choreographed and holds true to *Game of Thrones'* brutal style. The camera work for the concluding moments is nicely done

» Sound

Jon Snow (voiced by Kit Harington) has monotone delivery, carrying tones of disinterest. The remainder of the voice work falls in line with the high standards we've seen from Telltale's games

» Playability

If the quick-time events are going to be this easy, Telltale should just remove them. I'd much rather watch an action scene unfold if my interaction with it is going to be this simplistic

» Entertainment

Telltale expertly toys with players' emotions. If you walk away from this episode with anything other than a sense of dread for House Forrester, you're playing it wrong

» Replay Value

Moderately low



Style 1-Player Adventure Publisher Telltale Games Developer Telltale Games Release February 3 Rating M

In *The Lost Lords*, the second episode in Telltale's *Game of Thrones* series, the Forrester family is backed up against a wall, reeling in turmoil as Lord Whitehill's shadow looms dangerously over the entire house. Whitehill's influence is far-reaching, stretching from the Forrester's home in Wolfswood to Mira in King's Landing and across the Narrow Sea to new protagonist Asher in Yunkai. This house is on the brink of collapse, forcing each family member to search feverishly for ways to save it, even if it means crawling into bed with snakes – or worse, the Lannisters. Telltale skillfully pokes and prods at the Forrester bloodline, giving this episode just as much tension and intrigue as the first.

Telltale spends most of this episode methodically moving chess pieces across the board to keep the Forresters in a perpetual state of “check,” despite the family making advantageous moves that show us they are not all just pawns. The plot moves along rapidly, and carries the feeling that every beat of the clock is working against the heroes. Player choice, while not appearing as often as it did the first episode, is used effectively to alter the shape of major moments for the family and its future.

This chapter kicks off with our first look at Asher, the exiled son of the late Lord Forrester. Asher appears to be at peace, living life as a sellsword across the sea. We are introduced to him moments before an attack. Asher is cocky and quick-witted, sharing many of the admirable qualities of Jamie Lannister.

He has a more colorful personality than most of the prominent characters seen in HBO's television series or George R. R. Martin's books. He stands out from the other characters in a good way, delivering more humor and snarky comments than he probably should given the events at hand, but is a likable addition to the roster.

The battle we see Asher in, while filled with gore, plays out like a fight sequence in a *Pirates of the Caribbean* movie, with a little comedy, over-the-top chaos, and timely teamwork between Asher and his partner. The aftermath of the conflict leads Asher and the Forrester family down an interesting path. Like all great episodic series, it leaves you dangling and wanting more.

This episode also gives us a look inside House Forrester through a new viewpoint. I won't spoil the surprises that this story brings, but I will say that the choices you are forced to make are wonderfully nerve-wracking, and are crucial to the standing his family has with Lord Whitehill. This character is nicely penned (and voiced) and should make you sweat a little whenever he appears on screen.

Mira's dangerous dance with the Lannisters continues in this episode, offering plenty of tough decisions to make amid conversations with Tyrion and Margaery that come across a little too manufactured and out-of-character. The final moments of Mira's time in this episode are fantastic, giving her story a much-needed direction change that doesn't revolve

solely around Lannister mind games.

The only character viewpoint that doesn't push the story into interesting new ground is Gared's, the squire who joins the Night's Watch at the Wall. His tale grinds to a halt within seconds of him appearing on screen. You can almost hear Telltale's writers saying, “He's at the Wall. Now what?” as weak conflicts are introduced between Gared and the brothers.

Jon Snow makes awkward appearances in this episode, first for a brief “Look! It's Jon Snow!” celebrity sighting, and then later for a forced conversation with Gared. A tantalizing path is laid out in front of all of the other characters, but Gared's tale seems directionless at this point, even consisting of a moment where he walks over and pets his horse. I'm sure Telltale has grand plans for this squire, but they need to get there fast.

Gared's sequences muddle an otherwise excellent second chapter, which places the Forresters on even shakier ground than their introduction. Every ray of hope that shines upon them brings a hidden storm cloud that could burst at any given point. The final moments of this episode are beautifully captured, and show us that Telltale is just as skilled at putting heart into sequences as it is stabbing them to death. » **Andrew Reiner**

This review is based on the Xbox One version of Game of Thrones. The game is also available on PlayStation 4, PlayStation 3, Xbox 360, PC, and iOS

The Escapists

Plotting an escape is tedious work

Style 1-Player Strategy **Publisher** Team17
Developer Mouldy Toof **Release** Feb 13 **Rating** T

6

Xbox One • PC

» Concept

Craft materials, muscle up, and devise a plan to escape from secure prisons

» Graphics

The pixelated graphics are simplistic, trying to capture a retro feel. That's cool for the character models, but the prisons are too sparse

» Sound

The soundtrack gets the job done, but is overplayed, quickly losing its luster

» Playability

The Escapists relies heavily on discovery, making it your duty to learn the rules and its mechanics

» Entertainment

Escaping prison should be more exciting than this. Strategizing is fun, but the amount of repetition gets tiresome

» Replay Value

Moderate

Outsmarting the guards and making a great escape is every prisoner's dream, but as *The Escapists* demonstrates, it isn't easy. You meticulously plan, craft tools, wait for openings, and hope your plan goes off without a hitch. While the premise is interesting, the gameplay relies too much on repetition, never capturing the adrenaline rush of a daring escape.

The life of an inmate is routine, and *The Escapists* captures this to a fault. You eat meals, take on boring janitorial jobs, curry favor with other inmates, and exercise your mind and body to succeed. The simulation starts off amusing enough; waiting for the opportune moment to steal from inmates is exciting, and crafting better items gives you a constant focus. However, the daily repetition (especially locating specific, randomized items) becomes frustrating. Every day feels the same – another fight, another generic conversation, another roll call. Even when you escape one prison and get moved to another, the loop stays the same.

You suffer through the routine because you are preparing to escape. Your break-outs can happen in multiple ways, like digging your way out or taking over the prison with brute force. I enjoyed the creative and numerous routes to freedom, but hatching a plan involves too much patience and trial-and-error. You are given little direction for the complex mechanics, apart from a brief tutorial that barely scratches the surface. You must learn through failure. Want to cut your way through a fence? You need to be equipped with a fake fence cover before you do or you automatically get sent to solitary, lose all your contraband, and forfeit three in-game days. You only learn this after you attempt it, and you can't possibly predict every necessary step to avoid disaster.

The whole process is a tough barrier of frustration. From aggravating prisoners who constantly attack to the guesswork-focused crafting system, *The Escapists* is always challenging you. On the one hand, this gives you a grand sense of accomplishment when you win; I enjoyed those lightbulb moments when I finally figured something out, and I appreciated the tension that I felt every time I put my exit plan into the action. On the other hand, the slow progression loop and repetitive gameplay outweigh the brighter moments.

The Escapists implores you to dig deep for your strategy, but it doesn't offer enough excitement along the way. The concept is sound; I just wish I had more fun playing the game. » **Kimberley Wallace**



Devil May Cry: Definitive Edition

The devil is in the details



Style 1-Player Action **Publisher** Capcom
Developer Ninja Theory
Release March 10 **Rating** M

9

PS4 • Xbox One

» Concept

Make a range of changes, from significant to barely noticeable, to this stylish reboot

» Graphics

Visuals look great and the improved framerate is more stable

» Sound

The same music, voices, and effects from the original release

» Playability

Manual targeting and button remapping make it easier to direct the action

» Entertainment

Optional difficulty and gameplay modifiers let you customize the experience to be exactly what you want

» Replay Value

High

The trend of remastered games on new-gen systems can be easily summarized in two sentences: "It has improved visuals and all the DLC. If you didn't play it before, this is the best version." *Devil May Cry: Definitive Edition* also fits that description, but that isn't the whole story. With an array of small tweaks and optional modifiers, Ninja Theory goes the extra mile by giving hardcore fans a reason to revisit the action.

This definitive edition contains the whole base game, the Vergil's Downfall DLC, and a handful of character and weapon skins. All of the stylish combat and stunning environmental effects remain intact, but everything looks better and runs at a higher framerate than the original console version. These are all of the features we have come to expect from this kind of release, but I was more impressed by the less obvious changes made to improve the experience.

A bit below the surface, you find options to customize your combat. Changing your button layout, making the game faster, and making it harder to achieve high style bonuses are a few of the modifications, but they're all aimed at tailoring the battles to your personal preferences. As someone who got every collectible and beat every difficulty in the original release, I appreciate the excuse to keep playing and pushing my skills.

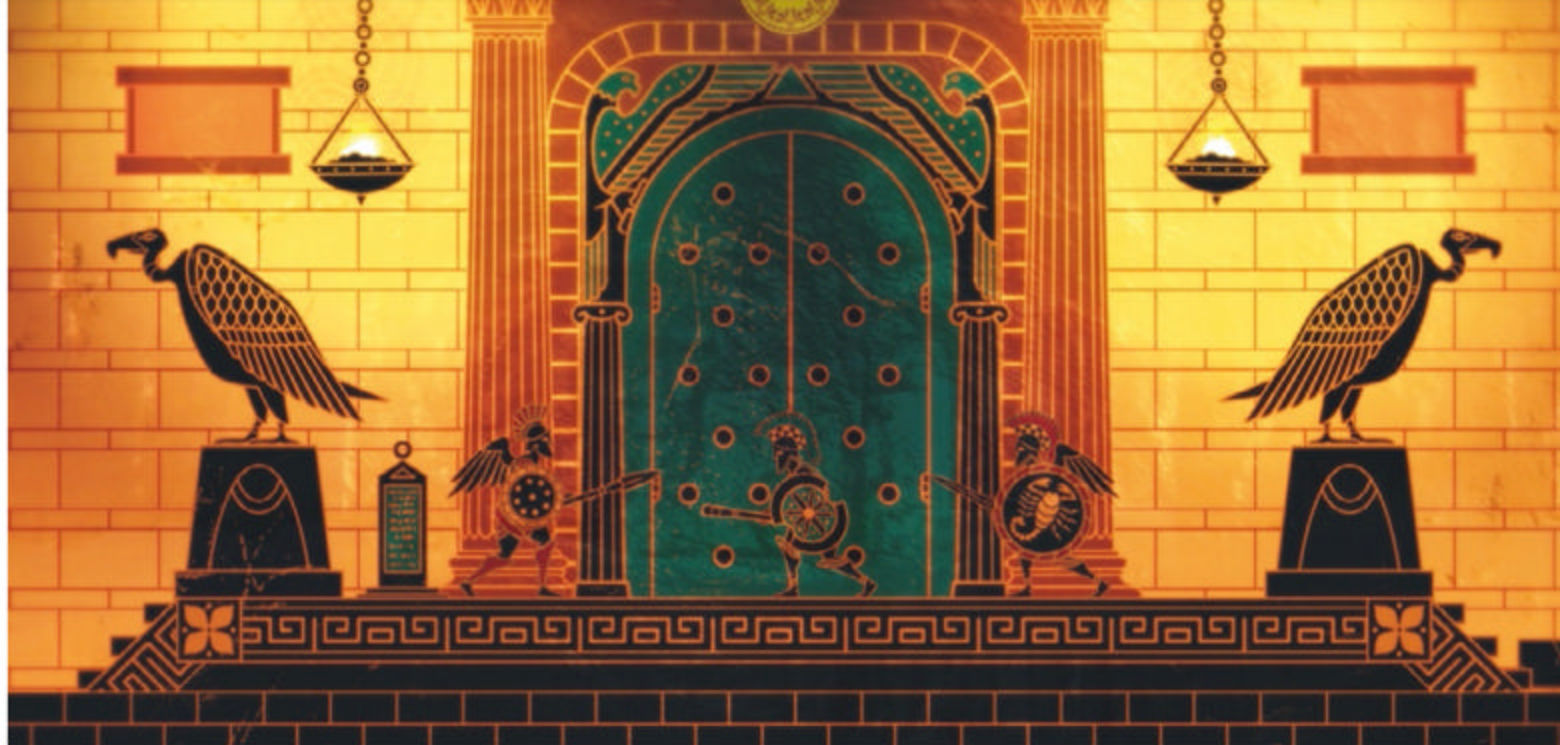
While most of the core gameplay feels the same, a handful of fan-requested tweaks have been worked in. A manual target lock is a welcome addition, Vergil has his own Bloody Palace (a multi-phase challenge of escalating difficulty), and formerly weapon-specific enemies are more manageable. If you're familiar with the original, these additions address some of the most serious complaints while leaving the stylish essence intact.

Delving even deeper, some changes are barely noticeable. Vergil doesn't wear his dumb hat anymore. The keys to access secret missions are now universal, and their locations are reshuffled. One new, brief scene adds a grain of additional context. These things may have a negligible impact on the overall experience, but they are evidence of Ninja Theory's commitment to polishing *Devil May Cry* into the best game it can be.

No game is perfect. Even when we play the best ones, we find things that we wish the developer had done differently. *Devil May Cry: Definitive Edition* is a rare case where the developer goes back and fixes those things, big and small. Whether you're a newcomer or a devoted fan, this is a remaster done right. » **Joe Juba**

This review pertains to the PS4 version of Devil May Cry: Definitive Edition. The game is also available on Xbox One





Apotheon

Ancient Greek art springs to life

9

gameformer
GOLD

gameformer
GAME OF THE MONTH

Style 1 or 2-Player Action Publisher AlienTrap Games Developer AlienTrap Games Release February 3 Rating T

PS4 • PC

» Concept

Greek mythology meets 2D
Metroid gameplay

» Graphics

Ancient Greek pottery
serves as the foundation
for the gorgeous and
creative presentation

» Sound

The voice acting shines, and
the wide spectrum of music
(composed by real Greek
guy, Marios Aristopoulos)
is fantastic

» Playability

Varied melee and ranged
attack options keep combat
fresh, and the platforming is
rarely unreasonable

» Entertainment

The unique look blends
with inventive and diverse
level design to create a fun
10-hour journey

» Replay Value

Moderate

Upon seeing Greek pottery art at a museum last year, I remarked to a friend that this would make a cool video game. "Someone is totally already doing exactly that," he replied. I'm glad someone had the idea way before me and had the skills to execute it so well; the characters and environments of Apotheon's Metroid-inspired creation are beautiful and you can even see the subtle texture of a handmade pot on every screen.

Apotheon delivers on more than great looks. It starts with head god Zeus abandoning humanity and convincing the rest of the deities to do the same. Without the benevolence of the gods, the Earth will wither and die along with all of the people residing on it. Our hero Nikandros teams up with Zeus' spiteful wife, Hera, to take on the gods one by one and gain their upgrades along the way. Comparisons to Sony's God of War series are unavoidable since they draw from the same pantheon, but they're so different in tone, look, and gameplay that the similarity is not a factor.

Combat works somewhat like a twin-stick shooter, with movement on the left stick and analog aiming on the right. Melee battles involve trading high, medium, and low shield blocks with similarly diverse overhead strikes, thrusts, and low hacks. Arrows and other projectiles offer both precise aiming and quickshot options. This balance of attack and defense offers a light strategic edge to fighting, but encounters are simple enough to be able to hack away at weaker enemies without a lot of fuss.

You can't just pick one strategy and stick to it, since weapons have a limited durability. I was constantly switching through swords, spears, axes, and clubs due to breakage. While this created offensive variety, I stuck

with a collection of ho-hum, medium-quality weapons 90 percent of the time, saving the big guns with special traits for boss battles.

What impressed me most about Apotheon is the variety and constant freshness of the levels. Every stage is built completely around the theme of its associated god. Poseidon's area has an ocean to sail around in, allowing you to visit dungeons on various islands or swim around in underwater cave networks. Athena resides in a massive spinning labyrinth loaded with traps and clever puzzles. My favorite area is Artemis' forest, which is populated with rare creatures to hunt topped off with a creative boss battle. As part of a hunting challenge, you take turns as the hunter and the hunted, trading off between human and deer form. The constant shakeup in themes prevents things from getting stale and always had me looking forward to the next surprising stage.

Thanks to the excellent map system, an important part of any Metroid-style game, it's easy to get around. With a quick button tap, a translucent map overlays the action and you can still move your little icon around the

screen. I used this while clearing out the fog of war, zipping to a new objective, or trying to see the larger scope of a puzzle. Enemies can still attack you, so you should return to normal view for battles and fine-tuned jumping.

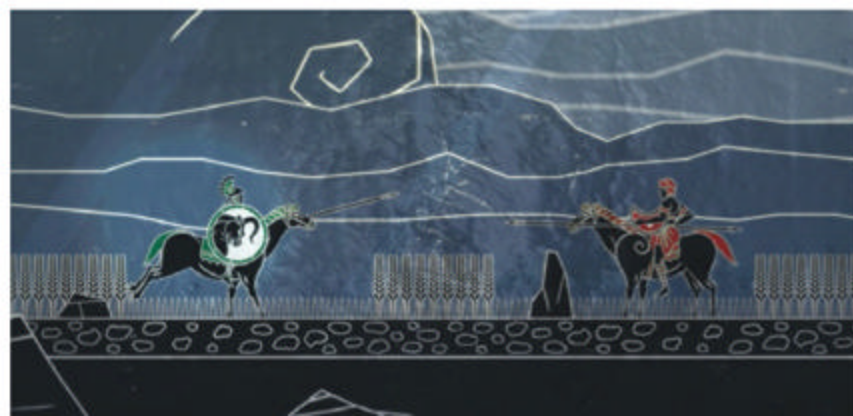
I did have a few issues during my play-through, however. During the Poseidon boss fight, for example, he knocked my ship off the screen (a key component in taking him on) and I had to restart it a couple times before everything worked correctly.

Apotheon also includes a two-player local battle mode. With more players supported, more maps, and added options this could approach Towerfall-style multiplayer mayhem, but with its sparse current offerings there's nothing to keep you coming back.

For me, the rich single-player experience was more than enough. Not only is Apotheon a tireless devotion to ancient Greek art and culture, it's also a damn fun game and one of my surprise early favorites of 2015.

» **Bryan Vore**

This review pertains to the PC version of Apotheon. The game is also available on PS4



The Order: 1886

Uncompromising cinematic vision



Style 1-Player Shooter **Publisher** Sony Computer Entertainment **Developer** Ready At Dawn **Release** February 20 **Rating** M

7.75

PS4

» Concept

Visit an alternate version of Victorian London in a mash-up of Arthurian legend and gothic horror

» Graphics

One of the most detailed and filmic game presentations ever

» Sound

Moody orchestral music and emotionally charged voice performances add nuance to these stories about men and women who have lived for far too long

» Playability

Gunplay is solid if a little stiff, movement controls are smooth, and cover mechanics rarely cause problems

» Entertainment

A beautifully realized world that sacrifices more involved gameplay in the name of cinematic presentation

» Replay Value

Moderately low

One of the things I love about speculative fiction is diving headlong into a new world and figuring out the details as the story unfolds. *The Order: 1886* is a triumph of world building, ripe to be explored by players who enjoy that sensation of confusion and discovery as the pieces of the fiction fall into place. Ready At Dawn's first original IP is also a masterpiece of cinematic immersion. Environments feel gritty and authentic, characters exhibit genuine emotions, and every scene looks like it could be a still cut from a thoughtfully crafted film. The technical and artistic talent on display is astounding, but it comes at a price. The clear desire to embrace the cinematic experience comes at the cost of player agency; *The Order: 1886* often places you in the passenger seat instead of letting you steer.

The Knights of the Round Table have survived the centuries, using a mystical and vaguely sinister tonic to unnaturally extend their lives. In the rare instance that one knight dies, a new soldier steps up to take his predecessor's name. Standing in opposition to these near-immortal warriors are the half-breeds – warped creatures torn from the pages of gothic novels. The long-lived knights of the Order have finally gained a foothold in the war through the advent of industrial technology, and now they serve a British Empire at the height of its power.

The story is structured around introducing the setting, but deliberate pacing and mature, complicated characters keep things interesting. The main characters carry the weight of too many years, and through smart dialogue and gradual exposition, we get a sense of the toll that endless fighting has taken; don't expect pithy jokes or other attempts to lighten

the mood. The Order's melding of established genres is seamless. London is oppressive and grim, but the zeppelins floating through the sky and sparking weapons on our heroes' backs remind us that this history is slightly off from the 19th century we know.

Production values set a high bar for new-gen consoles. Cool gray colors dominate, lending an antique flair to the immaculately detailed environments. Soft lighting and barely perceptible particles make each location memorable. Conversations exhibit remarkable character animation work, accentuated by excellent voice acting and naturally flowing dialogue at home in the Victorian vernacular. Old photos and scratchy phonograph recordings contribute authenticity, but these minor extras rarely add meaningful context to the story. A landscape view of the action is another nod to film technique, but I can't say I'm a fan of the way it limits the player's view of the action to a narrow bar.

While the visual technology on display is stellar, *The Order's* gameplay is in many ways a callback to earlier generations. A linear story carries the player forward, heavy on cinematic sequences and slowly paced periods of exploration. Quick time events crop up frequently, forcing timed button presses to resolve melee encounters and other crises. A simple lock-picking minigame blocks door access. Boxes must be pushed into place to open up a spot to climb. In short, *The Order* rarely grasps for innovation in its action, and the slower pace of many chapters puts a big focus on enjoying the setting, and a lower priority on interaction.

Combat is the centerpiece of gameplay, but even the battles feel familiar. I couldn't shake the feeling I was playing through a

long-established template for third-person shooting mechanics. Thankfully, a varied collection of weapons adds excitement; potent shotguns and machine pistols sit alongside more exotic offerings that fire off bursts of lightning or clouds of explosive thermite. Each of these cool devices has advantages and drawbacks, and I enjoyed experimenting with all of them. Aiming feels a little rigid, perhaps in a nod to the old-fashioned style of the guns, but the stiff response ultimately detracts from otherwise solid shooting.

Even if the fighting is a little derivative, the highly scripted action scenes remain tense and rewarding. Enemies are aggressive, flanking or pinning you behind a crate as it is steadily degraded by bullets. Moving between hiding places is smooth, and the occasional melee feels brutal and satisfying. Even a brief stealth sequence holds up well, though having failures send you back to a checkpoint is jarring. Needing to equip grenades rather than having a dedicated throw button gives them less utility, so it's easy to forget about them.

While *The Order: 1886* is a fun adventure with lots of intriguing reveals about the nature of its world, it's also clear that Ready At Dawn intends for this to be the first game of a grander story. Players should brace themselves for a lot of unresolved character arcs and unanswered questions. This is an origin story, but a fascinating one. *1886* goes against the current tide of open-world wandering and emergent sequences, and banks on the idea that players can enjoy a straightforward and relatively brief cinematic adventure – if it's well told and original. I hope Ready At Dawn is right; I'd love to see what happens in 1887.

» **Matt Miller**

Total War: Attila

Defend or destroy the empire



8

PC

» Concept

Play as a grand empire, roving horde, or engage in one-shot historical battles

» Graphics

It's great to zoom in and watch the carnage as swarms of units meet their end on the battlefield

» Sound

Appropriate shouts, grunts, hacks, and siegework smashing

» Playability

It's not an easy game to understand; a lot happens on and off the battlefield. The tutorial and prologue campaign acclimate players, but navigating the menus and upgrade systems can be intimidating

» Entertainment

If you've played a Total War game before, you know what to expect. Despite some new mechanics and ways to play, the core is cultivating your expansive holdings or charging headlong into battle

» Replay Value

Moderately high

Style 1-Player Strategy (8-Player Online) Publisher Sega Developer Creative Assembly Release February 17 Rating T

Total War: Attila doesn't reinvent the wheel – or the aqueduct. Instead, it capitalizes on the franchise's long-standing strong points with engaging combat and plenty of decision-making at the civic level as you manage an enormous empire. Several different modes are available, including a few different ways to play the Grand Campaign (either beginning as a huge empire ready to defend the borders on all fronts or a roving band of barbarians seeking to pillage the world). If you're looking for instant action, a number of historical battles await, along with custom games.

As always, the large-scale battles are the signature of the series, and it's fun to get right down in the thick of combat and see how things play out after executing your plans. Your foot soldiers, archers, siege weapons, and cavalry units all come together for an altogether satisfying clash with opposing forces on the battlefield.

Attila feels like a grand strategy game more than ever if you're looking to play traditionally, mostly due to the fact that you manage a vast empire from the onset if you choose to play as the Roman Empire. This is the best way to play if you're more into aspects of civic management, since you oversee family lines, manage city upgrades and population, and deal with being beset on all sides by various factions as you mix diplomacy and defense. If you're looking for a completely different playstyle, selecting the Huns for your campaign may be the best option; you start without any cities to manage, and move your robust starting army in for a campaign of assimilation and destruction.

I favored the all-out-assault methods of the nomadic tribes for campaign play. Razing is a significant change to this iteration of Total War, allowing players to burn captured settlements to the ground, trading long-term potential for an instant cache of resources. I found this extremely valuable during both types of play. As one of the Roman Empires, I simply didn't want to take on new territory that I would have to defend. As the tribes, I was often focusing on a strong core instead of a large empire. The option to raze keeps things from getting too bogged down with the disparate playstyles.

Total War: Attila has a lot going on from a management perspective, and it's a little overwhelming maneuvering through the menus and making sure every settlement is upgrading, every commander is leveled up properly, and that your people aren't going blind. The tutorial prologue campaign does an excellent job at laying out each aspect in an easy-to-digest fashion, but these systems all blend together and create a management nightmare when combined with the vast holdings that players start with as the Roman Empire. It's not a big detriment if you're really into civic management, but it holds back focus from the actual battles; consider playing as one of the nomadic tribes if you grow impatient with the time requirements of provincial politics. If you're not opposed to having to click through battles or fight several times each turn (even during your first few turns) as your borders are beset, then the Roman Empires might work for you. It can be a bit jarring, overwhelming from a control perspective, and even a bit dull

to engage in the campaign from the Roman perspective. If you find that to be the case, try one of the other campaigns.

Laying siege to a city is always a fun endeavor, and Total War: Attila title introduces siege escalation into the mix – your forces can wear a settlement down before engaging in the critical battle. It's a nice addition to the series, along with using fire in battle to demoralize and destroy bunched-up enemies in a hurry.

If you're doing anything other than historical battles, expect turns to take a significant amount of time, especially if you're engaging in the multiplayer campaign. While you can dull the blade of turn-based co-op gameplay with auto-resolved battles, plan on committing a lot of time to a campaign with other players. The jump-in instant battles are much more palatable if you're looking to test your skills against another human. While it's easy to hop into highly customizable multiplayer matches and campaigns, the single-player campaign experience is the title's main event.

While we're on the topic of time, Attila seems to suffer from some chugging as each faction cycles through at the end of a turn, some which resulted in a few game crashes on multiple PCs. While not detrimental to gameplay, it's a noticeable technical oddity.

Total War: Attila doesn't radically shift things in the franchise, and the new gameplay additions are most welcome. Siege escalation and razing are great to have as options, and the ability to play the campaign from distinctly different perspectives and playstyles gives you a reason to come back for more. » **Daniel Tack**



Sunless Sea

Seafaring stories to tell in the dark

Style 1-Player Role-Playing Game **Publisher** Fialbetter Games **Developer** Fialbetter Games **Release** February 6 **Rating** NR

8

PC • Mac

» Concept

A richly told story unfolds in the dark depths of a sea within the world of Fallen London

» Graphics

While they are threadbare, they do a fine job displaying the sea and its many locales

» Sound

The score does a great job conveying the dual elements of mystery and despair that propel your journey

» Playability

The tutorial is rather rough around the edges for a player new to roguelikes, with a tough-to-navigate UI and tome to read in addition to learning as you go, but once you have the basics down you should settle into the groove easily

» Entertainment

It's a rich, story-driven game of moving from island to island like some sort of Lovecraftian Odysseus. It's engaging, but loads of screens to push through and lackluster combat detract from the experience

» Replay Value

Moderately high

Sunless Sea is a macabre nautical trip through Fallen London and the Unterzee. The major draw is the lore behind this somewhat Lovecraftian backdrop of horrors in the unexplored darkness out in the sea. Unlike many roguelikes, the story is not a generic afterthought; Sunless Sea is almost half visual novel, half traditional roguelike. The mix works, driving you through the mist as you stretch your fuel reserves and hope to make it to the next dock before your little boat sputters out in the black void.

The core loop involves staffing your ship with a solid crew, loading up on supplies and fuel, and heading out into the unknown abyss to discover all manner of terrors and mysteries.

Each voyage holds the promise of uncovering untold secrets as you visit sunken landmarks, engage in the unique cultures on each Odyssey-style dock encounter, and wander into potentially disastrous situations. The ever-gnawing appeal of the next discovery drives you on, with the thought of death ever present – though a progression system assures that your legacy lives on.

Will you find some long-forgotten civilization? Will you perish in the cold dark, alone, mad, and feasting on your unfortunate sailors? I never knew what was waiting for me in the fog, and that irresistible curiosity drove me forward. The situations are grim, but wry humor peeks out beneath the surface. When

exploring new areas, it's always a good idea to do some research, reading, and reconnaissance first; one island culture revolves around masks, and wearing the wrong one can have devastating results.

You encounter monsters of the deep and deadly pirates as you maneuver the Unterzee, meeting odd denizens who provide your crew with stories to bring back to the people of Fallen London. These tales are worth collecting, since they bring in echoes (currency) to spend on ship upgrades, fuel and supplies, better lodgings to house your heir, and more. These upgrades are meaningful, allowing you to sail far from the safety of the docks of Fallen London and take on more powerful enemies. The combat, while quirky and entertaining at first, is threadbare with its simple aim-and-shoot mechanics. This isn't a huge problem, as combat is not a major focus of Sunless Sea.

At the core of Sunless Sea is the concept of choice; players make decisions during each playthrough ranging from core crew members to the pursuit of plunder and romance. The "turn-the-page" system, with its mini-expositions on each bizarre slice of life in the Unterzee, works great on the isolated islands. However, it gets more unwieldy at the main dock at Fallen London; the many screens you must maneuver in a choose-your-own adventure fashion often loop back on each other, forcing you to fight against the byzantine menu as you select a deluge of options. Sometimes it's challenging to get back to where you want to go in this maze of menus.

Sunless Sea is an interesting game that's worth playing for those that appreciate a dark yarn, players that love exploration, and even the "let's find out how to game the system perfectly" roguelike crowd. It's a unique mix of genres that's a finely crafted experience, marred by a few cracks in the cabin.

» **Daniel Tack**





Kirby And The Rainbow Curse

Drawing a line in the clay

7.75

Wii U

» Concept

Follow-up 2005's Kirby: Canvas Curse for DS with the same core mechanics, but a fully realized, molded clay world

» Graphics

Rainbow Curse's greatest strength is its visuals. It's not the first game to build its world out of clay, but it's impossible not to be instantly won over by the colorful charm

» Sound

The classic Kirby music hasn't been tweaked much for the latest entry, but it's still likely to leave you humming

» Playability

Controlling Kirby indirectly can be frustrating at times. I rarely felt Kirby went exactly where I wanted him to go, but thanks to smart level design, he usually found his way there anyway

» Entertainment

Rainbow Curse is different from any other platformer out there. I got frustrated by Kirby's insistence on staying rolled into a ball, but plenty of moments of innovation and fun appear throughout

» Replay Value

Moderately low

Style 1 to 4-Player Action Publisher Nintendo Developer HAL Laboratory Release February 20 Rating E

Kirby: Canvas Curse for DS marked one of the earliest examples of a DS game taking good advantage of the novel (in 2005) touchscreen. With players drawing lines on the lower screen to guide the hero, it was different from any platformer out there – a compliment that rings true even 10 years later. Rainbow Curse on Wii U is mechanically similar to its DS predecessor, but has an incredibly charming art style (even by Kirby's high standards) and other interesting wrinkles that make it stand apart – even though it gets frustrating now and then.

Rainbow Curse looks amazing; the world is made of clay, and everything appears molded by human hands. Elements of the world squish and move just like you would expect the colorful putty to do if it suddenly came to life. It feels like you could drag your finger across the screen to smear the clay, making the stunning art direction one of the big highlights. Kirby has always had a whimsical look,

and his new clay style does not disappoint. It may be a controversial statement, but I think he looks better in clay than he does in yarn.

In the minimal story, the color has been removed from the world, making it difficult for Kirby to eat apples. It's up to him and a sentient paintbrush (i.e. the player) to draw lines across the levels to move Kirby toward his destination. You don't control Kirby directly, which is where the majority of frustrations begin. Rainbow Curse is ostensibly a platformer, and having only secondary control of the character can be unnecessarily difficult. I wasn't rolling off into pits of death too often, but I never felt that Kirby was doing exactly what I wanted him to do. Thankfully, the levels are laid out in such a way that mistakes are easy to compensate for, but more precision (and not just a wider net to catch you when you fail) would have been much more satisfying.

Moving Kirby might be troublesome, but I

found lots to appreciate in the boss and level design. Moving Kirby from point A to B with a series of hills and platforms is not always your main goal; some levels flirt with puzzles requiring you to lay out paths for rolling metal balls to activate switches. One later level even splits Kirby in two forcing you to control both Kirbys at once. I enjoyed getting a break from straight navigation, but I also enjoyed solving the admittedly simple puzzles and unexpected directions of these sections.

New transformations like a tank and rocket ship also do a good job mixing up the levels. Most (but not all) Kirby games dole out transformations throughout the levels, but here they are segregated into their own sections letting the player focus on the new mechanics. The former creates fun on-rails shooter sections, and the latter creates high-speed sprints to the end of levels. I was always excited to come across the telltale canvas announcing a transformation section.

Co-op shines, allowing up to three players to play a more traditional Kirby platformer while the GamePad player focuses on Kirby and drawing lines and platforms. You won't run into any co-op-required or even focused sections, but with the painting of lines to create platforms, you get a sense you're all working together as opposed to just playing the same game simultaneously.

I never fully fell in love with only having secondary control of Kirby. Drawing platform lines is undeniably different, but I'm not convinced it's the best way to play a platformer. Rainbow Curse smartly toys with the mechanic, adding surprising twists and changes, and by the end I was having a good time – even if I still was yelling at Kirby to just do what I told him every now and then. » **Kyle Hilliard**



Monster Hunter 4 Ultimate

A perfect time to join the hunt



gameformer
SILVER

Style 1-Player Action (4-Player Online) **Publisher** Capcom **Developer** Capcom **Release** February 13 **Rating** T

Monster Hunter 4 Ultimate makes big strides to ease new players into its intimidating, decade-old gameplay formula. Expanded tutorial sections and online connectivity vastly improve the game's playability. Cool new weapons, feline companions, and online play also improve upon the established framework.

Monster Hunter 4 Ultimate's early optional tutorials succeed where my well-meaning friends' past indoctrination attempts have failed. Even without a MH sensei on hand to guide me, MH4U capably taught me the essentials. After a handful of hours, I understood the fundamentals of combat with each of the 14 weapons, how to hunt monsters, and what goes into crafting basic potions and traps. The frontend of the game may be loaded up with wordy text boxes, but the awesome localization kept me groaning-then-chuckling with plenty of cat puns and goofy dialogue.

In case you never previously understood the fervor surrounding Monster Hunter, at its simplest level it's about fighting big boss monsters, harvesting their corpses to craft new armor and gear, then repeating the process, preferably with friends. That simple, enticing premise is buried under a thick layer of cryptic menus, stats, and items that the game doesn't always capably explain. That's where MH4U begins to remind me of Dark Souls – you can carve out a fun-enough time playing solo, but talking through confusing elements with knowledgeable players adds satisfying new depth to the experience. I began having a blast once I finally wrapped my head around all the once-confounding systems, but be sure to keep a wiki or seasoned hunter friend handy.

Speaking of friends, MH4U is the first handheld entry in the series that lets players team up online (local play is also still available). Working with friends to tackle monsters like the huge, crustacean Seltas Queen is a treat. Strategizing who should hack off the tail (extra loot!), hammer the head (make it dizzy!), and set the trap for capture is a thrilling trial with satisfying rewards. Finally finding that last monster scale or fang to craft a new sword or hammer is supremely gratifying.

Combat sticks close to past entries. Most attack and healing animations are lengthy, and mistiming them leaves players vulnerable. Deliberate, methodical strikes are crucial.

I love examining a monster's routines and attack cues, then learning when to strike, dodge, or run like hell. Some players may become frustrated by lengthy knockdown animations and some monsters' erratic, aggressive behavior, but I grew to revel in the challenge.

Thankfully, if you find yourself getting stomped by a pesky monster, the Palico companions come through in a pinch. You eventually recruit a small army of the felines and send them off on away missions to collect scrap that can be crafted into new cat armor. Up to two charming furry pals can join you in the field to distract monsters, heal you in a pinch, and collect resources. These adorable helpers are more than cuddly trimming – they offer just the right amount of genuine assistance without getting in the way.

Two new toys have been added to players' arsenals. The Insect Glaive lets you use a flying bug to collect stat-boosting buffs off monsters and pole vault into the air for high attacks. If you're lucky, you may be able to mount and deal damage to monsters rodeo-style – a fun new way to subdue even the saltiest of creatures. The Charge Blade is a transforming weapon which lets players deal big damage by hacking enemies up in axe form, then changes into a more nimble sword and shield for increased dexterity and defense. Both of these cool, unique playstyles blend in well with the existing weapons.

I've poured a ton of time into MH4U, but in the context of this series I understand this is only the beginning. Hundreds of solo and multiplayer missions await, along with a staggering number of huge monsters to hunt and lots of gear to craft. Don't let the early learning hours and initially perplexing systems deter you; this is the best opportunity to find out what keeps fans coming back to Monster Hunter. As an enamored new fan, quitting isn't an option.

» **Tim Turi**

8.75

3DS

» Concept

Fight a huge cast of deadly monsters, harvest their bodies to make better gear, and repeat while trying to keep your head above the complex systems

» Graphics

The unique designs of each monster and their respective gear sets are colorful and eye-catching

» Sound

The music is scant until you confront a vicious beast. The orchestra pumps up the intensity when it kicks in

» Playability

The New 3DS c-stick makes this handheld iteration more playable than others. The steep learning curve may turn off newcomers

» Entertainment

Dozens of hours of fun are available to longtime fans or new hunters with enough patience to learn from the early sections

» Replay Value

High



The New 3DS XL Difference

The New 3DS XL's c-stick vastly improves MH4U's core playability (and the new hardware reduces loading times). Using the little nub to move the camera and scan the environment for resources or target enemies is a game changer. Playing MH4U on an older 3DS works well enough, but for me as a relative newcomer, there's no going back to the touchscreen/d-pad camera controls after using the c-stick. If you're new to the series, understand that playing without these advantages is a significantly inferior experience.

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Crew, The	7	Feb-15
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Dance Central: Spotlight	6	Nov-14
Destiny	8.75	Nov-14
Disney Infinity: Marvel Super Heroes	6.5	Nov-14
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Project Spark	7.5	Dec-14
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Wii U

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6 | Grow Home

Platform PC Release February 4 Rating NR

Not every release needs to have ridiculous triple-A aspirations. That being said, even considering its limited scope, *Grow Home* doesn't feel complete. The technology behind the gigantic plant is cool, and seeing it take over the world below you is interesting. However, the game that you play between those realizations rarely blossoms into entertainment. — Joe Juba

8 | Gunman Clive 2

Platform 3DS Release Jan 29 Rating T

Gunman Clive 2 has an undeniable old-school sensibility missing from even the glut of nostalgia-fueled independent titles. It doesn't waste energy building a consistent world – if something seems like it would be cool, it gets thrown at the wall and it sticks regardless of whether cowboys really did interact with dinosaurs or not. I had a great time with *Clive* for that reason, even if controlling him paled in comparison to the bizarre universe he exists in. — Kyle Hilliard

7.25 | Gravity Ghost

Platform PC Release January 26 Rating NR

Just when *Gravity Ghost* is hitting its stride, it comes to a quick close. The puzzles are never too challenging, but if you can relax and go with the flow, the simple platforming sequences have an almost zen-like tranquility. Still, Iona's heart-wrenching story is clearly the game's heart. — Ben Reeves

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8.5 | Life Is Strange

Platform PS4, Xbox One, PS3, 360, PC

Release January 30 **ESRB** M **Issue** Mar '15

The focus on realistic problems is refreshing and the care put into Maxine's world and the relationship-building holds plenty of promise.
— **Kimberley Wallace**

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From Business Software To Bloodborne

From Software's unlikely trajectory to power developer is infused with variety and a lot of soul

by Daniel Tack

When you hear the name From Software lately, you probably associate it with the Souls series. Starting in 2009 with the release of *Demon's Souls* and continuing onward to *Dark Souls*, *Dark Souls II*, and a spiritual successor in the upcoming *Bloodborne*, the series has driven the recent acclaim showered on the company in North America. But this Japanese studio has actually been around since 1986, developing over 60 games, acting as publisher on many others, and now boasts over 230 employees. Not bad for a company that has seen its fortunes rise and fall with a shotgun blast of various games over the course of its near 30-year history.

Though From Software is now specifically thought of as a game developer, the company began with a very different directive. "When the company was built, we were developing the business-application software instead of game software," says From Software public relations representative Yasunori Oruga. "We started the game-software development when the first PlayStation was introduced. At that moment, only about 10 people were in charge of the game development."

The studio's first PlayStation project was *King's Field*, a role-playing game that shipped in 1994. The pioneer game in the series was available only in Japan, and set the stage for From's enchanting fantasy medieval role-playing backdrops, focusing on exploration and

heavy atmospheric elements. While the game is first-person centric, it served as an obvious inspiration for *Demon's Souls*, featuring dreary and foreboding elements, deliberately paced combat, little-to-no handholding or game-provided assistance, lack of storytelling via NPC interactions, and striking environments.

"The expression of the 'real feeling' in the game is very important for us," Oruga says. "But it doesn't simply mean to create something graphically 'real,' but to provide the feeling of the reality in the gaming world. A game can deliver different kind of joy. Most of our creations consist in the sense of achievement or pleasure while trying over and over again along with different emotions."

The game proved to be successful enough to justify the company's transition to game developer, and several sequels followed. *King's Field II* and *III* launched in North America in 1995 and 1996, respectively, with the final main series title *King's Field IV* launching in 2001 on the PlayStation 2. The *King's Field* console prospects were ultimately done in by lukewarm critical reception, with some denouncing the slow and laborious gameplay. From continued to develop *King's Field* games on mobile platforms through the mid 2000s.

From Mechs To Martial Arts

Dark fantasy may be From Software's original setting of choice, but it embraced science fiction for its next major series. *Armored Core* kicked off in 1997 on the PlayStation,

featuring third-person mech combat in a post-apocalyptic world. The formula proved successful in Japan, giving the series a long life and a deluge of titles leading up to the recent 15th installment, 2013's *Armored Core: Verdict Day*. These games allow for heavy mech customization that gives players the chance to engineer a perfectly tuned battle machine.

While juggling several game projects in the early 2000s, From Software was approached by Activision to work on the popular *Tenchu* series, which helped popularize the stealth genre by placing players in the role of a deadly ninja. The series in feudal Japan tests players commitment to the ninja code – the better you lurk in the shadows and execute stealth kills, the higher the score you receive at the end of each level. After developing several games for the franchise, the company bought the license outright from Activision in 2004.

More Mechs

From Software's love of mechs extends beyond *Armored Core* and *Chromehounds*. It's also behind the *A.C.E.* (Another Century's Episode) series, which features high-profile mechs and characters from popular anime selections such as *Mobile Suit Gundam Wing*, *Metal Armor Dragonar*, and *Aura Battler Dunbine*.

The mechs don't end there, at least not in Japan, where From released *Mech Wolf Chaos* in 2004. In the game players control a fictitious president of the United States as he blasts around in a powered armor suit and battles forces that have taken over the U.S. Yes, you get to battle the vice president and yes – this game really happened.





Dark Souls

The Shadow Of Souls

Another From Software series that introduced features now considered to be signature elements to the Souls series is the esoteric Shadow Tower franchise. Released on the PlayStation in 1998, it shared a lot in common with the King's Field series – a dark, action-oriented, role-playing dungeon crawl with somewhat inscrutable direction. Unlike many standard dungeon crawlers of the day, Shadow Tower features no auto-map, so a brilliant memory or some graph paper is a good idea to bring along. The sequel, Shadow Tower Abyss, was launched in Japan on the PlayStation 2 in 2003. Here you can see some of From's earlier days of environmental experimentation at work, with castles, temples, forests, water-oriented zones, and other groundwork that would eventually be realized in far more dramatic form in the Souls games as technology advanced. Both games featured weapon deterioration and destruction, again something we would see echoes of in the Souls series.

We haven't seen a new game in the series since 2009 with Tenchu: Shadow Assassins for the Wii and PSP, but it's easy to see how some of the core concepts that make Dark Souls so popular could be transferred to a ninja game.

From continued to hone its melee action gameplay with the well-received Otogi series. The Sega-published games garnered favorable reviews over the course of two entries on the Xbox, but ultimately couldn't find enough financial success to justify the continuation of the series.

In 2006, From Software returned to its mech roots with Chromehounds, which launched on the Xbox 360. Customization was again at the forefront here, with many options to change the functionality of your Hound. While the Armored Core series focuses on sleek-looking battle robots that we commonly associate with mechs, Chromehounds features highly industrialized, militarized versions of popular armaments like the howitzer. The clan-focused online play featured persistent wars, which helped the game develop a small but devoted cult following. The servers shut down in 2010, killing this essential component of the game.

Finding Its Soul

For the next few years From Software continued to pump out Armored Core and King's Field releases, but it also had a new project in development that would prove to be the beginning of a massive new chapter for the studio. Demon's Souls may have hit at just the right time to catch the eyes of many gamers looking for a formidable experience that didn't lean on heavy-handed tutorials or ensuring the player had a streamlined experience from start to finish. In 2009, the unforgiving nature of the game struck a chord with those spoiling for a challenge, as the vast

majority of mainstream games had strayed away from high difficulty encounters or, at the very least, had various difficulty modes that could be selected. None of the Souls games allow players to dial down the difficulty.

"The Demon's Souls' development idea, which became the base of the Souls series, was to reproduce the classical RPG with the latest technology," Ogura says. "We wanted to express the fun we felt in the games of the past such as the discovery, fun to think through, and achievement in the latest platform."

Demon's Souls only came to the PlayStation 3, but even with its limited marketing budget word of mouth spread. In a year where Uncharted 2, Assassin's Creed II, and Batman: Arkham Asylum captured most

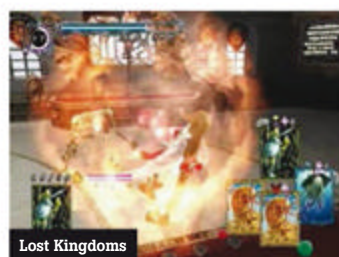
of the buzz, some outlets gave their game of the year nod to this difficult throwback.

Emboldened, From Software found a new publishing partner and released the spiritual successor, Dark Souls, in 2011 on PlayStation 3 and Xbox 360, giving a whole new audience the chance to delve into the dark fantasy for the first time. By the time Dark Souls II hit in 2014, the series had cultivated an ever-growing legion of acolytes across every major platform.

From Software's constant iteration on the dark fantasy design has proven fruitful. Where its creative minds will take us beyond Bloodborne is anyone's guess, but after seeing the scope of imagination and atmosphere spill out onto the carefully woven tapestries of the Souls series, it's bound to be interesting. ♦

Fantasy Diversions

From Software die-hards may recall a lesser-known gem of the GameCube era, Lost Kingdoms, released in 2002. Known as Rune in Japan, Lost Kingdoms is a real-time fantasy card-game RPG, a mix that feels quite distinct and unique. Players control the protagonist Katia as she moves through the game. As the player has no attack abilities, combat is largely dodging enemy attacks and summoning monsters to do your bidding. Many of the same cards show up in the 2003 sequel, Lost Kingdoms II, which featured enhanced options with the same style of gameplay. After the sequel, the Lost Kingdoms franchise has fallen off the map, but it's something we'd love to see resurrected for current-gen in some form.



Lost Kingdoms



REAL HEADLINE OR TOTAL FABRICATION?

As video gaming becomes more entrenched in the mainstream, we're starting to see headlines surrounding the culture that industry founders probably never thought they would read. Can you distinguish between the real-world events and the ones we completely made up? *by Matt Bertz*



1 MEDICAL DOCTORS QUIT LUCRATIVE PRACTICE TO MAKE VIDEO GAMES

2 MAN SICK OF XBOX ASKS FOR JAIL INSTEAD OF FINISHING HOUSE ARREST

3 **HARDCORE GAMER**
ELECTED TO SUPREME COURT

4 GAME DEVELOPER OUTBIDS JAY-Z FOR BEVERLY HILLS MANSION

5 PETA PROTESTS LATEST
POKÉMON GAME
ON LAUNCH DAY

6 FOX NEWS CLAIMS
VIDEO GAMES DO NOT CAUSE VIOLENCE

7 COUPLE STARTS WORLD OF WARCRAFT ACCOUNT FOR 2-YEAR-OLD DAUGHTER

8 TAIWANESE MAN DIES AFTER THREE DAY ONLINE GAMING BINGE

9 **HACKERS HIJACK CAR USING NINTENDO CONTROLLER**

10 SORE LOSER SICS SWAT TEAM ON RIVAL AS REVENGE FOR **BEATING HIM IN CALL OF DUTY**

11 LIBRARY OF CONGRESS COLLECTS VIDEO GAME SOURCE CODE FOR PRESERVATION

12 GEORGE LUCAS TRIES TO NAME THE FORCE UNLEASHED PROTAGONIST "DARTH ICKY"

13 **AR-15 MANUFACTURER**
BUNDLES CALL OF DUTY WITH GUN PURCHASE

14 **FALLOUT PR STUNT LEAVES 10 WITH RADIATION POISONING**

15 **LEGENDARY GAME DEVELOPER QUILTS INDUSTRY TO MAKE BEER VIDEOS**

SCORE & RANK



15 CORRECT:
JADE
BEYOND GOOD & EVIL

A true seeker of truth



10-14 CORRECT:
ELENA FISHER
UNCHARTED

Willing to go that extra mile to find a good story



5-9 CORRECT:
FRANK WEST
DEAD RISING

Tough to keep the story straight when you are knee deep in zombies



0-4 CORRECT:
KHALISAH AL-JILANI
MASS EFFECT

You obviously deserve a punch to the face ♦



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